University of Alberta

Beyond Reader-Response Theories of Reading: Psychoanalytic Theories and Sex/Gender in the High School English Classroom

by

Elizabeth Anne Schlender

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Secondary Education

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex workings of sex/gender as it comes into play when a reader meets a text. I worked with a class of English 23 students in an Edmonton high school. I examined their written responses to five texts to gather information about: 1) the kinds of primary, unconscious knowledges about sex/gender that students possess; 2) whether/how these unconscious knowledges function to predispose students to accept, assimilate, or resist the notions about sex/gender in a text; and 3) the potential of psychoanalytic theories to further our understanding of the processes whereby a reader constructs a unique interpretation.

The study springs from my conviction that we must remain aware, as we approach fictional texts with our students, that adolescent readers are not simply "male" or "female" by any essentializing biological or socio-cultural definition. Each reader comes to a text with many defining specificities, of which I take the experience of sex/gender to be the most fundamental and the most problematic, particularly for adolescents.

Reader-response and feminist literary theories have both played influential and valuable roles, over at least the last fifty years, in radically altering the way English language arts instruction looks in our schools. Reader-response theories, along with post structuralist and postcolonial theories, have helped us to understand the reader-text exchange in fundamentally different terms than earlier perspectives offered, or allowed. Feminist theories have attempted to compensate for a long tradition of patriarchal bias in western cultures that has privileged male authors, male critics, and male experience. However, despite more than two centuries of discourse honoring Enlightenment/humanist

ideals of equality and justice, expressions of misogyny and homophobia are all too evident in our classrooms.

Psychoanalytic theories help to explain why this is so by pointing to the existence of the unconscious and providing a vocabulary that we can use to talk about its role in shaping behavior, including the reader-text exchange. Students' responses have convinced me of the need to push beyond the interpretations of reader-response theories as they are expressed in and undergird existing curricula, teaching practices, and assessment strategies in English language arts classrooms in Alberta.

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Chapter One: Theoretical Perspectives

The Song of Wandering Aengus[1]

I went out to the Hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when the white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossoms in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.
—William Butler Yeats

Emerging Awareness of a Problem: A Personal Context

"Wandering Aengus"

Several winters ago, in a graduate seminar in English Language Arts in the Department of Secondary Education, an experienced, capable high school English teacher handed out copies of Yeats' poem "Wandering Aengus." Along with it, she gave us a copy of an essay question that she had developed for an Alberta Education English 30 final exam, which requires that students respond to and provide an interpretation of an unfamiliar piece of literature. (In Alberta, the provincial Department of Education sets a common exam in English 30 and other university matriculation subjects. Successful completion of the exam is a requirement for university entrance.) She distributed copies

of the poem to the ten members of the seminar group (two male and seven female students, myself included, and the female instructor) along with the following instructions which would be given to guide students' responses to the poem:

> Read "The Song of Wandering Aengus" carefully and thoughtfully before you start the writing assignment.
>
> W. B. Yeats' poem suggests that our capacity to imagine influences our lives, providing a sense of purpose that serves to inspire and motivate.
>
> What details of the poem do you consider to be effective in influencing imagination? Explain your reasons for your choice of detail on the basis of how it affects you as a reader.

She asked us to read the poem silently, imagining ourselves as the students who would write the exam, and to work out the response that we might offer. We were given about fifteen minutes to formulate an initial response and to choose significant, compelling, or memorable images from the poem to share with the group along with a rationale for our choices.

The objective of this exercise, as I understood it, was to illustrate the merits of a different kind of question that could be asked on this section of the exam. This would be a question which would allow students to offer a more personal and meaningful response to a text than exam questions have normally solicited. It was also intended to illustrate how reader-response literary theory can prove both practical and valuable in designing evaluation instruments that will solicit answers that might be more indicative of the quality of the interaction between a particular reader and a particular text than the kinds of questions about poetry that a student would more typically encounter on these achievement exams.

The orientation toward the reading of poetry revealed in this open-ended and unapologetically subjective question about "Wandering Aengus" demonstrates, to my mind, a laudable attempt to move away from restrictive evaluation practices designed to assess the extent to which students have learned to read, analyze, and discuss a text. Exam questions or essay topics arising from this view of literature assume that students will analyze and discuss such elements as formal structures and devices, stylistic techniques, tone, imagery, and symbolism as separate from and independent of the

ideological content, or the *message*, that a particular reader hears in a text (putting to one side, for the moment, what position we assume in the debate about where that message originates or how it is constructed, conveyed, or received). The message, as I use the term here, is not the same thing as the *theme* of a literary work. The New Critics would argue that the theme is a fixed transhistorical and often transcultural "meaning" inscribed in the poem which is of enduring, universal, and transcendent human significance which preexists any particular reading or mis(sed)reading of the poem and is most correctly articulated at a very high level of abstraction.

The phrasing of the question soliciting students' responses to the images in "Wandering Aengus" does open up and validate a much broader range of possible readings and ways of connecting with the poem, and is theoretically consistent with a reader-response approach to reading. This approach rejects the notion that there is one correct way to read a text or that the meaning of a poem is something that the author consciously puts there and which waits, like buried treasure, to be uncovered by diligent student readers, who are provided with the necessary tools by expert teachers who already know the poem's secrets. Most reader-response theorists believe that every reading of a text will be unique and, at least to some degree, unpredictable. It sees individual readings as a co-creation of the reader and the author, which means that the author can only anticipate or control to a very limited extent what actually goes on behind a particular reader's eyes. The question about the effective use of imagery in "Wandering Aengus" does recognize that students will find individual ways to engage with the poem. However, it is also highly directive and functions to disallow certain readings. It normalizes and perpetuates a system of sex/gender relations in which women are viewed as different from and inferior to men in some very fundamental ways, and it has buried within it some huge presumptions and value judgments about how the poem will and "should" be read.

It may be useful at this point to take a small detour in order to comment on my reasons for adopting the somewhat clumsy conjoint term "sex/gender" to discuss what was initially referred to in biological terms as sex, and then in sociological terms as gender. Charles Shepherdson points to the insufficiency of either term by itself to

encapsulate what is at once a biological, psychological, and physical imperative and a socially constructed phenomenon:

> The 'law' of sexual difference, then, is not a human law; like death (that other imperative), it is not a human invention, and should not be situated at the same level as the 'social roles' that concern contemporary discussions of 'gender.' This imperative is, of course, taken up and 'symbolized' differently by different cultures, and therefore enters into history, but it would be a mistake to reduce 'sexual difference' to one more human convention, as though it were synonymous with what we usually mean by 'gender.'[2]

My reading of "The Song of Wandering Aengus" in the context described above was my first meeting with the poem. Since then, I have tried to re-capture this first reading as fully as possible, and to re-trace how subsequent readings and my thinking about what and *how* the poem means for me have developed. I remember reading the poem with a growing sense of annoyance with both Yeats and Aengus, the speaking persona of the poem. In the ensuing discussion about how we would have answered the question, I pointed out that I was finding it difficult to focus on effective imagery in the poem. Although I did appreciate it as a well-crafted example of an expert poet's facility with language, I was also busy processing the content of the poem and arguing with the world-view and the notions about sex/gender that I felt the poet was asking me to accept, and which seemed to be the basis upon which my appreciation of his poem should rest. I was dealing with an awareness of myself as a marginalized reader and with ambivalent feelings of fascination and resentment toward the "glimmering girl" portrayed in the poem.

The first question I needed to ask myself was why my feelings after reading the poem were so mixed. The second was whether my reading was entirely idiosyncratic, or whether it could be understood as an indication that the poem may be an unsuitable choice for this specific exam situation. I have already said that my response was resistance and irritation with the poet. At the same time, I found a great deal of pleasure in the sense of wonder, magic, and unlimited possibilities which suffused my reading of the poem. My pleasure was undercut by the realization that it was derived either 1) because I had succeeded in an acrobatic tour-de-force of imagination and had constituted

myself as a male reader, or 2) because I identified with the woman/muse presented in the poem. It would seem that I chose the first alternative, while also recognizing on some level that either one would mean that my reading would create some degree of dissonance and not be entirely satisfying.

I found several aspects of the experience of reading, thinking about, and discussing this poem within the given context disquieting. It raised serious doubts in my mind about how we approach literature in our classrooms and about the expectations that we create in students' minds with respect to "correct" ways of reading and responding to literature—that is, the approach that will earn them the highest marks on "The Exam," whether it is an exam set by a government authority or by the classroom teacher. The question, as it appears above, would constitute a significant portion of the English 30 final grade. Students would be aware that this mark would appear on their official high-school transcript and that it would influence their opportunities for further education and, possibly, future career prospects.

The poem is, at least from one perspective, and, I would argue, the most accessible perspective—a perspective that the poet, literary critics (male and female), and most teachers would be likely to adopt—"about" a male persona who is reclusive, romantic, a poet and a deep thinker ("A fire was in my head"). He goes fishing to calm himself and catches a "little silver trout" which, when he turns his back, transforms itself or is transformed into a beautiful, ethereal, and elusive "glimmering girl." This female vision stays just long enough to evoke an intense longing in him before she disappears. The last stanza describes, in retrospect, Aengus's long and futile quest to find her again.

The origin of the "glimmering girl" is unexplained, and inexplicable with reference to logical or realistic standards. The poet "catches" her, only to discover, in an archetypal Lacanian moment, that he is the one who has been caught. The "glimmering girl" is nameless, beautiful, seductive, and young; she is also elusive, fickle, and treacherous. She awakens in Aengus an indefinable desire, a sense of something eternal and sublime which the speaker cannot capture, either literally or even (especially?) in language. She seems to be a symbol (again in Lacanian terms) of a pre-oedipal sense of wholeness and completion in the Real. She stands in for the lost object that could, if regained, heal the rupture and fill the void that is inevitably created when the "law of the father," or the

symbolic order, disrupts this imagined unity. The speaker visualizes an illusory perfect woman who is also an ideal muse; the fact that she is wholly desirable, and also dependably unobtainable, ensures for the poet an inexhaustible source of creative energy.

Yeats' poem is to me a vivid illustration of Lacan's thesis that woman is the *sinthome*, or the symptom, of man. That is, in a very real and concrete sense, "man" does not exist except in relation to the figure of "woman." Because we are trapped in and by language, "man" has no way of defining himself—of creating an *ideal ego*—except in relation to the absences, the exclusions, and the disavowals that come to reside in the textual representation of woman. The three registers—Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic—are equally implicated in the formation of the sinthome.[3] Dylan Evans explains the nature of the sinthome in a manner which seems particularly relevant to the image of "woman," as a psychological and textual strategy which incorporates and draws from all three registers, in Yeats' poem:

> The *sinthome* thus designates a signifying formulation beyond analysis, a kernel of enjoyment immune to the efficacy of the symbolic. Far from calling for some analytic 'dissolution,' the *sinthome* is what 'allows one to live' by providing a unique organization of *jouissance*.[4]

It seems to me that in order to make the kind of sense of the poem that has made it an enduring popular and critical success, in order to experience the aesthetic pleasures that have resulted in its being consistently anthologized since its first publication in 1899, and in order to empathize with Aengus's loss and his unceasing quest, I am encouraged to adopt one of two reading positions. The poem "works" most effectively—that is, it evokes sympathy for Aengus's plight, either 1) from a heterosexual male reader who will identify and empathize with the male narrator's plight and who will implicate himself in Aengus's ambivalent emotions about the girl who seduces and then deserts him or 2) from a heterosexual female reader willing and able to imagine herself in this "universal" white, male, subject position. This second position is a familiar one, but is becoming increasingly frustrating and uncomfortable for me as I become aware of how often female readers are asked to do this. There are, of course, many other possible subject positions from which to read the poem. A gay or lesbian grade eleven student would probably find a position, and would read the poem with some degree of difficulty and/or satisfaction,

but in our culture and our school system, this would almost surely require an even more violent reconstitution of the "self" in relation to the poem than it does for me as a heterosexual female reader.

I am concerned about the assumption that reading in this way is natural and unproblematic for the girls in our classrooms. I am convinced that it makes a great deal of difference to an adolescent girl to face an examination question which asks her to respond to the imagery in a poem such as "Wandering Aengus" at the same time that she is struggling to construct herself as a sexed/gendered individual in a society that places a premium on the "Other" sex/gender, and attempting to negotiate the tension between actively deciding and passively accepting what her place in the world as an adult woman will be. Any presentation or discussion of this poem that ignores the question of stereotyped, asymmetrical sex/gender roles is incomplete and one-sided at best, and will encourage and legitimate some frustratingly atavistic and repressive ideas about women. One of my motivations for undertaking this study is my conviction that we need to approach literature in the classroom with an awareness that the readers in front of us are not disembodied or androgynous (although neither are they simply or unambiguously "boy" or "girl"). Each reader comes to the text with many defining specificities, of which I take the experience of sex/gender to be the most fundamental.

Rough Justice

It was during the same time frame in which I was struggling with "Wandering Aengus," attempting to conceptualize how texts which portray a male-centered world (whether written by male or female authors) function to characterize reading as a very different activity for females than males, and to formulate some sense of the implications of this phenomenon, that I saw a production of Terence Frisby's play *Rough Justice*[5]. Reflecting on my engagement with the play has both illuminated and further complicated the questions that I was already struggling with concerning the many different kinds of knowledge (both conscious and unconscious) that sexed/gendered readers bring to the interpretation of texts and textual representations of sex/gender.

The plot of *Rough Justice* centers on the trial of James Highwood, a well-known social critic and television personality who has confessed to and been charged with the murder of his nine-month-old profoundly handicapped son. At the time of the alleged

murder, he and his wife Jean had two healthy children, a boy and a girl three and five years old respectively, in addition to the infant whose developmental potential was so limited that his doctors agreed he would never walk or talk and, in fact, would never see, hear, or recognize his parents. He would have required constant nursing care during his estimated life-span of some forty years. At the same time Jean Highwood was seven months pregnant with a fourth child.

The story is unquestionably the husband's story. The action begins in a courtroom, with Highwood standing trial for the murder of his infant son. We hear testimony from an emergency room doctor about Highwood's curiously dispassionate manner when he handed the baby's lifeless body over to hospital staff, asking only whether or not it was too late to donate the baby's organs. We hear Highwood's testimony about his desperate state of mind, the circumstances that pushed him to take such extreme measures, and his arguments regarding whether or not he was capable of forming the specific intent to commit the murder. Highwood conducts his own defense and the majority of the scenes center around his emotional testimony and his heated arguments with the judge and the prosecuting attorney.

In one scene, the pathologist who conducted an autopsy on the baby testifies that the manner in which he was killed was not indicative of an impulsive, unplanned action. He tells the court that the person who killed the baby would have had to stand over the struggling, kicking infant, holding a pillow over his head firmly and continuously for two to three minutes. Highwood describes the confusion and desperation that prompted his action as he attempts to convince the jury that they should define his act as manslaughter rather than murder, whether or not he planned the deed on some unconscious level. He appeals to them to recognize the power that they own to decide, in this specific case, whether his actions meet the criteria for first degree murder or not. He cites precedents to convince them that they are not bound by a legal system which attempts to categorize crimes according to unambiguous definitions, which spells out the concomitant punishment rigidly and simplistically, and which is unable to take into account individual circumstances.

The judge clearly does not sympathize with Highwood. He regards him as a murderer without a conscience, deserving of the most severe punishment that the law will allow.

He has no problem interpreting the narrative as it is presented to him: it is clearly the story of a man who has confessed to killing his child and who shows no real remorse. He does not even attempt to rationalize or soften the act by arguing that he was under such extreme duress that he lacked the ability to form the intent to kill or that he did not understand that what he did was wrong. The law clearly states that if he premeditated or intended the baby's death, no matter how conscious or nebulous this intent, then he must pay the penalty for first-degree murder. The judge has no means of reading the evidence differently or imagining a different story.

The jury finds Highwood innocent of first-degree murder but guilty of manslaughter. Frisby apparently wants the audience to sympathize with his protagonist's rhetoric about the justice system being archaic, rule-bound, and unable to adjust to extraordinary circumstances—in other words, that it lacks humanity. The issues that this problem play most obviously invites an audience to consider are: Was it morally right or wrong to end the life of this particular child, in this particular context? To what extent must a man go to protect and look after his wife and children? Does his duty to his wife and his healthy children justify extinguishing the life of his handicapped son? What can he do about changing an unjust legal system as a result of his high-profile image, and the publicity around the trial which his celebrity status has generated? These overarching moral and ethical questions are at the heart of the action, and a great deal of dramatic tension is created by Highwood's eloquent speeches focusing on the injustice of imposing the death penalty in this specific instance, and by the dilemma faced both by the jury in the play and by all of us in the audience.

For three hours, I actively immersed myself in Highwood's story. I absorbed his anger, his indignation, his frustration, and his pain. I was momentarily disconcerted when I realized that Highwood was lying about how his son died, but I pushed this niggling discomfort to the back of my mind. I read the play in terms of a familiar story line about a principled and noble (if less than perfect) husband and father who struggles heroically with a moral dilemma and makes a decision, however misguided, about the right course of action. He stands up to "the system," and does what he believes is necessary for his family. My focus on the father's story caused it to temporarily eclipse another story

which was there, begging to be told and heard, but which I chose to disregard until the next day.

We learn, mid-way through the play, that it was, in fact, Jean Highwood who murdered the child. The female prosecuting attorney, Margaret Casely, is the one person who recognizes the contradictions in the text as it unfolds in the courtroom. She strives to construct a reading which can accommodate some facts that don't make sense to her and is sensitive to details which suggest the existence of another narrative. She does not accept, on the basis of what has been said, that the accused had sufficient motivation to kill his son. She watches Jean Highwood fall apart on the witness stand and puzzles over her extreme distress when the judge orders that she be barred from the courtroom for the duration of the proceedings. The peculiar fact emerges that when Highwood was arrested, he had two sleeping pills in his pocket, which he took that night to ensure that he would get some sleep. This strikes Casely not as the mark of a callous murderer, nor as evidence of premeditation, as it does the judge, but rather as the action of a guilt-ridden and solicitous wife who knows that her husband will soon be arrested and is concerned that he not suffer any more physical discomfort than the situation demands.

The prosecuting attorney is the one character who sees the woman's role in the case as central rather than peripheral and who imagines the existence of another story which is not male-authored nor male-centered. Jeremy Ackroyd, a lawyer and close family friend who is unofficially assisting with Highwood's defence, has no idea that Highwood's story is fabricated until Jean tells him that she murdered their son and that Highwood is protecting her and their other children. Casely, on the other hand, sees a woman who is, at the time of the baby's death, physically and psychologically depleted by the demands of caring for two active toddlers and a fretful, demanding infant while coping with another pregnancy. She guesses what really happened and offers the defendant a last-ditch opportunity to change his testimony, but he insists on his original version of events. His wife protests, demanding the right to take the witness stand and give her own testimony. He tells her that he cannot allow her to testify because of the hardship it would impose on her three healthy children if she went to jail. It is her duty to remain at home for them and his to protect this arrangement. She reluctantly accepts his decision, and allows him to silence her. Her quiet, unassuming demeanor and body language, along

with the fact that he has a high-profile career while she is a homemaker, wife, and mother, work to obscure her role and ensure that the spotlight stays on her husband. She obediently concedes the public forum to him while she remains unobtrusively in the background and allows him to tell the story for both of them.

Again, I have found it extremely interesting to attempt to recover how my reading of the play has changed and developed over time. I have tried to identify two aspects of my reading of *Rough Justice*: firstly, the intra-psychic and societal influences that shaped my initial response to the play; and secondly, why and how I have since recognized additional layers of complexity and ambiguity which have allowed/forced me to interrogate my interpretation in ways that have been valuable for me, and to identify some important questions about how sex/gender functions in a reader/text exchange.

The Problem: Moving From a Macro to a Micro-Perspective

Men's and Women's Spheres: Differential Access to Literacy

It does not surprise me to note that "Wandering Aengus" draws on and embodies some of our most treasured ideas about male poetic genius or that *Rough Justice* is very effective in implicating an audience in its male representation of a woman's story. Given the continuous history—at least since the advent of ancient Greek civilization—of institutionalized patriarchal rule, male appropriation of knowledge and reason, and the differential access of males and females to education in Western culture, it would be surprising if this were not the case. For centuries, education for females in European and North-American cultures was either non-existent, inferior, or designed to reify and replicate patriarchal definitions of sex differences. This is true whether these differences were viewed as biologically determined, culturally necessary, or ordained by God, who was decidedly Christian, white, and male.

As a result of insistent and passionate arguments by women such as Bathsua Pell Makin (*An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen*, 1673), Mary Astell (*A Serious Proposal To The Ladies*, 1694), Catherine Macaulay (*Letters on education*, 1790), Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication Of The Rights Of Woman*, 1792), Virginia Woolf (*A Room Of One's Own*, 1928; *Three Guineas*, 1939), along with many others both before and since,[6] we may not need to argue in the 1990's that women have the

same rational capabilities and the right to the same level and quality of education as boys. There are not many "debauched sots," as Bathsua Makin so colorfully characterized them, who would still contend, as was common as late as the 1950's and 1960's, that a liberal education is wasted on a girl because: (1) males have superior intellects and/or (2) a woman's natural path and her duty is to get married, have children, and concentrate on the needs of her family. For both of these reasons, larger concerns such as philosophy, politics, and business are better left to men. The most obvious institutionally-entrenched inequities have been redressed. Girls are allowed—indeed, for the most part, required—to attend school along with boys. Legislation has been enacted with the intention of ensuring that girls have the same educational access and opportunities as their brothers.

This does not mean, however, that the problem has been solved, or that what girls are learning in our schools, and the methods we are using to teach them, are helping them to construct an image of themselves as beings of equal value, possessing the same power to shape their world as the men around them. J. C. Smith and Carla Ferstman point out that after more than two centuries of discourse honoring the Enlightenment/humanist ideal of equality, we still have sex/gender discrimination; after nearly a century of universal suffrage, we still have only token female representation in the structures and hierarchies of power. The reason, in their view, is that concepts such as "reason" and "justice" are irrelevant to behavior not regulated by or amenable to the intervention of conscious, rational thought processes:

> We will argue that the transformation in discourse has failed to alter the reality of live practice because the practice itself is neurotic rather than merely mistaken. One cannot cure misogyny by appealing to reason any more than one can cure neurotics of their neuroses by pointing out and explaining how unreasonable their behavior is. The employment of the concept of neurosis as a metaphor for male misogyny is, we will argue, valid. Misogyny can be viewed as a neurosis of the male collective psyche and therefore as a collective neurosis. [7]

Although I take exception to their assumption that *only* males have been and are misogynist, and that *only* males are implicated in this collective neurosis, I do accept their contention that misogyny (as internalized and manifest in the psychic structures and the

behaviors of large numbers of human beings, no matter what course the process of sexuation has taken) is remarkably resistant to the discourses of justice and equality, and that tensions and dissatisfactions surrounding sex/gender can legitimately be discussed as expressions of neurosis. Until the entry of psychoanalysis into the discussion, the murky depths of the problem remained obscured and largely inaccessible to existing discourses. This is not to say, of course, that phenomena identified and discussed by psychoanalytic theory were not recognized and did not exist previous to Freud and his followers; but that psychoanalytic theory as an organized area of exploration with a specific vocabulary linked to these phenomena and a prescribed methodology to treat the symptoms that it labeled pathological did not exist prior to Freud's writing.

The Shifting Ground Of Sex/Gender Relations

As I read and try to make some sense of writings in the area of literary theory and criticism (in particular reader-response, feminist, and psychoanalytic literary theories) in an attempt to trace the connections between reading and the range of hotly debated and often seemingly contradictory psychoanalytic explanations of the formation of a sexed/gendered identity, the questions appear increasingly more troublesome and the answers less certain. The more I try to organize and synthesize some thoughts about the meaning and the practical implications of the fact that the authors whose texts we select for study in our classrooms, the characters in those texts, and the student readers that we ask to read them are all sexed/gendered beings, the more I experience a sense of standing on a fault line. Under my feet, imperceptibly but certainly, some deep underlying assumptions that have formed what seemed to be a relatively solid basis on which to build our various theoretical and political camps threaten to collapse in a moment of violent upheaval.

When I attempt to stand back and take a distanced view—an aerial snapshot—of the ways in which sex and gender are currently being discussed and problematized, I am forced to recognize that it is not easy to get any kind of a firm hold on "the problem" (which is really an endless number of problems) as evidenced by such diverse and troubling phenomena as the following:

- The statistics on violence and abuse within families, which reflect the inequities in the way our society assigns power to males and females and which provide ample support (if any is needed) for a discussion of misogyny as neurosis.
- The changing structure, function, and status of the traditional nuclear family as evidenced by statistics on divorce, separation, and parenthood outside of marriage.
- The literature (feminist, sociological, religious, anthropological, and psychological) which argues convincingly that rigidly differentiated sex/gender roles as learned and played out within the isolated, nuclear family never were the panacea for society's ills as held up by the dominant ideology of the 1950's. However often or loudly a reactionary, ultra-conservative element insists to the contrary, we neither could nor should want to go back to a time in which differential privilege based on class, family lineage, ethnicity, race, sex, sexual orientation, and physical and mental "normalcy" was accepted as right, natural, and God-given. (I mean "sex" here, in the sense in which it has been used until fairly recently, as two self-evident and mutually exclusive biological categories, male and female.)
- The very aggressive cultural and institutional codes that categorize cultural commodities and pastimes as unmistakably masculine or feminine. These divisions deliberately define and police the boundaries between the two genders as the antitheses of each other—or, more correctly, they continue to replicate enlightenment, humanist thinking whereby man is the standard, and woman is defined as deviation from the norm. At the same time, slippages are becoming increasingly apparent despite these norms and prescriptions and the concomitant penalties for ignoring them. Codes governing the proper performance of gender are firmly fixed and generally transparent, but quickly become visible when they are transgressed; that is, most boys by the age of three will be quite sure that they know what it means to be a "real guy," but will likely articulate this understanding by explaining what it is *not* rather than what it is.

  (I recently observed a small drama which demonstrates how this typically works: My husband and I were in a video store renting a movie when my attention was caught by a group of four teens, two boys and two girls who looked to be about 16 years old. They were trying to agree on the selection of a movie, which would

apparently be that evening's entertainment. One of the girls picked up a selection, pointed to the illustration on the cardboard jacket, and suggested it as a possibility. The other girl asked "What kind of movie is it?," to which the first responded "It's a tear-jerker." This statement elicited immediate and simultaneous groans from the two boys. One then said, dramatically and with a great deal of machismo that didn't conceal an obvious edge of anxiety, "Yeah right...Like I'm going to sit there and cry about a movie...Boo-hoo!" This last was delivered very dramatically, with lots of fake sobbing and fists wiping away invisible tears.)

- The desperate preoccupation that we can see among young people in our schools with critiquing and "policing" their own and each others' performance of gender, in ways that attempt to either reinforce or disrupt rules and expectations with regard to leisure activities, mannerisms, styles of dress, and many other behaviors and traits that are seen as linked to sex/gender.
- The obsession with finding a compatible romantic partner as seen on television talk shows, in newspaper singles' ads, and in singles' chat rooms on the Internet, which are no longer structured according to the traditional formula: "boy meets girl, recognizes her as his missing half (as in the inestimable line from the movie *Jerry MacGuire*, "You complete me"), marries her, and lives happily ever after in suburbia in a house with a white picket fence and two kids." Rather, they openly challenge any "natural" or "necessary" connection, contiguity, or simple equation between biological sex, gender, heterosexual desire, and a "traditional" family structure, and are demonstrating that such definitions are exceedingly slippery and problematic.
- The endless number of existing permutations, combinations, and negations of the "natural" infant↔mommy↔daddy family triangle, which all schools of psychoanalytic thought assume as the foundation for their theories. These variations, whether they are becoming more widespread or simply more visible, confound any essentializing or biologistic theory of gender formation.

A Vista of Questions that Need to be Explored

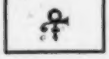
If we attend seriously to such phenomena, we must recognize that what we know about sex/gender is considerably less than what we still need to know, and that there

exists a need for work which pursues a clearer understanding of questions such as the following:

(1) How do we form a sexed/gendered identity?

(2) How and why do we learn to construct, perform, and read sex/gender in ways that are at the same time remarkably consistent and disturbingly inconsistent across and within cultures, so that a music celebrity such as Prince is recognized mainly because he is a highly visible exception to a generally inflexible rule? ("The Artist Formerly known as Prince" has achieved pop-culture icon status largely as a result of legally changing his name to an unpronounceable graphic which melds the Greek symbols for male and female, as illustrated in figure 1, and then, more recently, back to simply "Prince.")

Figure 1



(3) How do we learn to read sex/gender and to make immediate and instinctive judgments about its truth or authenticity when we meet it in film, literature, or in person?

(4) Why/how does a classification system which attempts to reduce sex/gender to a self-evident dichotomy pose the kinds of life-long difficulties that they do for so many of us?

These questions contain within themselves, and are complicated by, the difficulty of reaching a consensus about the definition of sex/gender, which has come to be understood in a number of widely divergent ways:

(1) as an unambiguous and immediately recognizable biological given, like brown eyes;

(2) as a developmental task by which, in the absence of pathology and in the course of "normal" development, individuals naturally move toward becoming "real" (masculine) men and (feminine) women;

(3) as a product of behavioral conditioning, by which appropriate gender behaviors are reinforced and inappropriate ones are extinguished;

(4) as a product of enculturation, which involves cultural coding, modeling, and internalization of divergent and somewhat arbitrary gender roles on the basis of biological sex;

(5) as a question of character involving good and bad, right and wrong, proper and improper conduct;

(6) as a moral, ethical or religious dilemma involving notions of guilt, shame, and sin.

It has become apparent that, no matter how we understand it, issues surrounding gender are for the most part studiously ignored in high school classrooms. Many teachers believe that these issues are too sensitive and controversial for the classroom in a climate charged with political tensions. Alberta classrooms are currently the site of a struggle between ultra-conservative proponents of *Happy Days*, "family values," Walt Disney, and 1950's nostalgia on the one hand, and advocates of a more liberal stance on the other. The latter (myself included) demand greater tolerance of differences, insist on "political correctness" (which to me means refusing to devalue, or to allow myself to be made complicit in the devaluation, of myself or any other person), and see no value in a willful blindness and an unwarranted optimism that does nothing to help our students deal with complex, muddy, and often painful realities of life.[8] At the same time that we are avoiding face-to-face confrontation of the deep-rooted anxieties and neuroses that manifest themselves in sex/gendered polarities, inequalities, and hostilities, rigid rules with respect to the "correct" construction and performance of sex/gender are built into everything we do in schools.

Bringing My Question into Focus

A panoramic view of the terrain of sex/gender and reading reveals a complex topography that includes many gaps and unexplored grey areas. I have chosen one area of this terrain to investigate, picking my way carefully through one small portion of the minefield, dancing around some of the undetonated explosives while attempting to defuse others (to borrow a militaristic metaphor from Annette Kolodny[9]). I have very tentatively crystallized some aspects of the problems surrounding the relationship between reading and sex/gender which I find particularly compelling and which I believe are clearly under-theorized at this point:

- Do students approach and experience the reading they are asked to do in high school English classes differently as a function of sex/gender?
- How do students respond to, and what do they do with, representations and assumptions about sex/gender in texts? This applies both to texts that they read as (a) reinforcing or consistent with, and (b) contradicting or inconsistent with what they already know about sex/gender, their own sexed/gendered identity, and about how the world is structured and how it functions with respect to sex/gender.

- When they encounter a sexist or gender-biased world-view in literature, do students set to one side, (if only temporarily) their own knowledge or first-hand experience of sex/gender as irrelevant to the text at hand as a means of coping with the contradictions and the schizophrenia that would otherwise make reading from this very personal sexed/gendered perspective an alienating and uncomfortable experience?

  An example of this kind of response is my own recent viewing of the film Angels and Insects. I found the movie interesting, aesthetically pleasing, and artistically satisfying in many ways. I thought that it handled the difficult theme of incest in an original and intelligent, if disturbing, way. I also found that the movie created a high level of dissonance for me as a female viewer. The story is told from the point of view of a sympathetic male protagonist who is essentially used and rejected by his wife. She is sexually and emotionally more committed to her brother, and possibly to her father, than she is to him. In order to watch and respond to the movie in the way that I believe the writer, producer, and director envisioned and constructed the story, I would have to accept certain notions about women:

  1) *That women are objects of exchange—a beautiful one is worth more than a plain one.*
  2 *That plain girls can be smart, nice, supportive, interesting intellectual companions, and/or valuable work mates, but they are also asexual and don't get husbands.*
  3) *That beautiful girls are sexually exciting, so they do get husbands (who don't care whether they have minds or not).*
  4) *That sex is all about power and control. Some men, like the protagonist's brother-in-law, use this power in a mindless animalistic way that can hurt and humiliate women, but a desirable woman uses this same impulse in a more calculated, dispassionate way to get what she wants.*
  5) *That women's reproductive capacity sets them on a pedestal and gives them inordinate power over men. The lead female character in the movie is a representation of the archetypal "Queen Bee" or "Black Widow," combining fecundity and motherhood with Amazonian lust, greed, and power.*
  6) *That this kind of woman values normal, good men only for their capacity to father genetically desirable babies.*

7) *That the male impulse to victimize or brutalize women stems from a deep sense of impotence and inferiority when faced with a woman's more "real" reproductive and sexual powers.*

8) *That women are designing, morally unprincipled, and pernicious, which might justify their abuse by men.*

- On what basis do students read, interpret, and decide on the reliability, the credibility, and the validity (i.e., the *believability*) of the meanings surrounding gender which a text offers? That is, what meanings does the text invite/allow them to bring to it, in order to make sense and derive pleasure from it, or to take away from it, in terms of a change in attitudes, feelings, or behaviors about gender stereotypes or conflicts between and among explicit messages and unconscious beliefs or predispositions about gender?
- Are psychoanalytic theories regarding the construction of a sexed/gendered identity relevant to the subjective reading position—that is, the points of identification and complicity or resistance—that a student adopts with respect to textual representations of sex/gender?

Statement of The Question

All of the areas that I have mentioned beg for further investigation, but since this study is necessarily limited in its scope, I have further refined the focus of my investigation, and have arrived at the following as a statement of my question:

What is the relationship between sex/gender and the subjective reading positions that student readers take up vis-a-vis gender as encountered in a variety of school-assigned literary texts that, on the most accessible or obvious level, either:

(1) invite them to accept and enjoy stereotypical, dichotomous, repressive, or impossibly idealized images of boys and girls (men and women) or;

(2) invite them to recognize and explore problems inherent in these cultural stereotypes, polarized images of gender and gendered attributes, and allowable relationships between them, as they are at present understood and enforced?

Sub-Questions

The question as stated above includes the following sub-questions which are at once separate and inextricably entwined: .

(1) What will students articulate or demonstrate in written and verbal responses to these texts about their prior understandings of the acceptability or inappropriateness of gendered behaviors, attitudes, emotional responses, and/or relationship strategies portrayed in the texts, based on conscious or unconscious psychological predispositions and/or societal prescriptions?

(2) What will these same responses demonstrate about how, whether, or the extent to which these conscious and unconscious knowledges, beliefs, assumptions, and predispositions about gender are open to change as a result of school-assigned reading and classroom discussion?

(3) How might psychoanalytic understandings of sex/gender and psychoanalytic literary theories help to identify and understand the impact of the unconscious, irrational and contradictory feelings and beliefs about gender that influence how student readers approach and interpret textual representations of, and information about, gender?

(4) What clues might these responses provide about how to help students develop reading skills and practices that will help them to raise conscious awareness of, and to better understand, the role that gender plays within a text and in determining their response to a text?

Description of the Study

Participants

I worked with one English 23 class of thirty students in an Edmonton high school. In Alberta, English 23 is designed primarily for second year high school students who are not working toward university matriculation. I chose a particular Catholic high school in northeast Edmonton because Kim teaches English there. Kim was a fellow graduate student in Secondary English education for two years prior to my study, and I felt that she understood the aims and the theoretical orientation of my research. I knew that she would give me a great deal of support and cooperation. I also knew that she would keep her students' needs and their relationship to literature as the primary focus in the classroom

while they participated in my research. I hoped that we would all learn and grow and that this work would enrich the educational community in which I was invited to participate.

I chose to work with these students, who were primarily in grade eleven, because I wanted to work with students whose age and membership in an adolescent high school culture would almost certainly mean that they would be facing and dealing in some way with the task of constructing their vision of a possible or an ideal adult identity, which presumably at this stage would incorporate what they would describe as a nearly fixed or "finished" sexed/gendered identity. My second major consideration in selecting this class was that I wanted to work with a teacher and a group of students who were not immediately constrained by the Alberta Education diploma exams, as would more likely have been the case in a grade twelve English class.

I recognize that any particular high school will inevitably reflect the very specific socioeconomic, racial and/or ethnic make-up and characteristics of the community from which it draws its students, and that its population may be culturally either very heterogeneous or relatively homogeneous. I believe that assumptions, attitudes, and norms regarding gender are more closely tied to, and vary to a greater degree as a function of, these socio-cultural specificities than many psychoanalytic theories would suggest. Thus, the fact that the school's population was almost entirely Catholic, drawn from a largely working-class area of Edmonton, and that the ethnicity of the majority of the students was Italian, Greek, and Portuguese is a highly significant factor in interpreting these students' responses, although I am not presently in a position to make any definitive statements about the nature or the effect of those specificities. Any data that I gathered and any conclusions that I reached are interpreted in relation to the specific adolescents who participated in my study, and any findings or implications are applicable to a larger population only to a limited extent and only with a generous degree of caution and scepticism.

Methodology

I worked with these students for six weeks, for three of the six sixty minute blocks that they had scheduled each week for English language arts. During the other three blocks, Kim continued with her normal program. I structured my investigation as follows:

Part I

I first introduced a small number of short texts (short stories, plays, poems, essays) deliberately chosen for their implicit and explicit messages and their underlying ideology, preconceptions, and notions with respect to gender. Some of the texts that I chose present what I understand to be stereotypical and even sexist images of gender and gender relations, and (in my view) invite the reader to "lean into" these cultural constructions of gender, while others seem to me rhetorically constructed to invite criticism of prevailing norms and ideology around sex/gender. The eight texts that I finally settled on, after a great deal of deliberation, are as follows:

1. "The Little Prince" (1993) by Suniti Namjoshi (a short prose mock-fable/fairy-tale);
2. "Behind Times" (1989) by Gary Lautens, (a short humorous essay, first published as a newspaper column, 1991);
3. "The Fall of a City" (1993) by Alden Nowlan, (a short story);
4. *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995) by MCA Universal, (a contemporary movie);
5. "Switching Places" (1994) by Rex Deverell (a contemporary stage play);
6. "Porphyria's Lover" (1989) by Robert Browning (a poem, first published 1836);
7. "The Griesly Wife" (1984) by John Manifold (an Australian poem, originally recorded as a song);
8. "Medea the Sorceress" (1996) by Diane Wakoski (a poem, first published 1991).

I presented and had students respond to the eight texts above, but because I worked with a fairly large group and because their responses were so rich for my purposes, I decided to analyze responses to only five of the texts in this dissertation. I chose to set responses to "The Fall of a City," "Switching Places," and "Porphyria's Lover" aside for the present, with the intention of looking more closely at them in the future. My rationale for selecting the five sets of responses to work with included the degree to which, in my view, students were affectively engaged with the text, how appropriate the text seemed to be for the purpose of my investigation, and the "yield" and richness of each set of responses.

I presented the texts with a minimum of preamble and with no conscious attempt to influence how students would read them. I read the print selections aloud to the students

as they listened and followed on their own copies. (In all cases except for "The Fall of a City" and "Switching Places," which are fairly long relative to the other poems and prose texts, I read the selection twice.) I then gave students a second copy of the text, which I had broken up into short sections interspersed with a generous amount of white space. I read the selection aloud once more. Pausing at each break, I asked them to respond to that portion of the text. I told them that these responses might include: (1) telling me about their feelings such of pleasure, irritation, disappointment, or confusion; (2) points of agreement or disagreement (with characters or the author); and/or (3) questions or comments about what the author or the character/s is/are doing and what is happening in the story.

I read "The Fall of a City" once, stopping at predetermined breaks to allow them time to respond. I asked four student readers to prepare and present a dramatic reading of "Switching Places" for their classmates. I showed the movie "To Wong Foo" once and asked them to write an initial response to the movie as a whole; to say something about the representations of gender in the movie; and to describe eight of the principal characters in one sentence. For the next class, I chose seven scenes and showed them a second time, pausing after each segment to give them time to respond in writing.

This is a very general framework for the manner in which I approached the reading of the texts, but as I introduced each specific text, this approach did vary considerably. I will discuss how my approach varied with the individual texts, and my rationale for doing so, in later chapters dealing with the students' responses to each of these texts. I

Part II

For two of the texts, "The Griesly Wife" and "Porphyria's Lover," I spent one class as described above. During the next class, I divided students into small groups (four students/group), with some attempt to make the groups gender-balanced. Kim and I were able to do this with no difficulty because the ratio of girls to boys in the class was almost exactly 1:1, although this ratio did vary to some degree depending on which students were absent on a particular day. Kim agreed to help me structure these groups, partly on the basis of student preferences and partly with a view to including a diversity of voices and viewpoints in each group. With the students' permission, I audiotaped these discussions. Their task was to discuss the text that we read the previous day.

In structuring these discussions, it was necessary to tread a delicate balance between being entirely non-directive, which might mean that students would ignore the text entirely; and being overly prescriptive, which might mean that I would only get their thoughts and feelings about some very specific questions that I had previously decided were the important ones for them to address. I did provide some initial prompts, suggesting a possible direction that the discussion might take, but I attempted to do so with a light and careful hand. I hoped to hear about some of their tentative thoughts, their resistances, their points of contact with the texts, and how they would articulate these in a group setting. As well, I hoped to find some clues in these tapes with respect to whether/how the dynamics of the group that they participated in seemed to function to reinforce or to challenge the peer-group, inter-personal, and intra-personal forces that operate to define, delimit, and enforce appropriate gender behaviors and attitudes.

Tapes of these conversations were interesting, but I chose not to spend a great deal of time and energy analyzing them because students did not appear to me to interact freely or naturally. For at least two reasons that Kim and I could deduce, students' conversations around the texts were significantly less interesting than their writing. One reason was that this group of students, in Kim's experience, seemed to be exceptionally self-conscious and cautious about sharing their ideas with one another. The second reason had to do with the tape recorders themselves. In many cases, students remained highly aware that they were being recorded. In several instances, the tape recorders became the subject of an extended discussion, apparently because students were feeling uncertain about what Kim and I expected them to talk about.

I can see almost none of this self-consciousness in the students' written responses to the same texts. Their writing was often abbreviated and did not always exhibit a sophisticated command of the rules and conventions of spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction, but it did always appear to me to be an honest and relatively uninhibited attempt to express their thoughts about the text. For this reason, I listened to the tape-recorded discussions with interest, but chose to focus my attention on the students' written responses.

Part III

Much of this study depends on my interpretation of students' individual written responses to the texts I asked them to consider. I have done so with very little input, help, or feedback from the students. In order to gather more detailed data, and as a check on the validity of my perceptions, impressions, and conclusions, I also interviewed six students individually about their responses and my reading of their responses to the texts. I attempted to make these interviews open-ended and to actively solicit and create spaces for any questions, opinions, feelings, insights, or discomforts that might have arisen in the course of reading and/or discussing the assigned texts. I encouraged these students to share, anonymously, anything that they may have chosen to keep to themselves during the more public and permanent, and therefore possibly more inhibiting, activities of writing their thoughts down for me or sharing them with a group of their peers.

I hoped that these interviews would provide me with some in-depth data not accessible during a whole-group activity, and that they would serve as a check on what might be unwarranted perceptions and hasty conclusions on my part. However, for many of the same reasons that influenced my decision with respect to the small group discussions that I recorded, I chose to focus my attention at this time on students' written responses. The interviews did highlight the benefits of encouraging a student to talk about and extend their response to a text, and they did point out some important pedagogical considerations, but it seems to me that questions about strategies for discussing students' written responses should be the subject of another study. My project at this time is to demonstrate the value of attempting to read students' responses in a new way with the help of psychoanalytic theories.

Notes: Chapter One

1 William Butler Yeats, "The Song of Wandering Aengus." In *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. New York, N.Y.: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1956.

2 Charles Shepherdson, "The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex," 1994, p. 161.

3 For a clear and concise discussion of these terms, see Mark Bracher, *The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education*, 1999, pp. 25-67. See also Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 1996, and see also my discussion of the three registers in chapter three (p. 80).

[4] *ibid*, pp. 188-190.

[5] Terence Frisby, *Rough Justice: A Play*, 1995.

[6] Since space here prohibits a full discussion of the continuing tradition of resistance that did exist, this cursory list does a grave disservice to the many women writers who did persist in pursuing this argument, often in the face of virulent opposition. See, for example, such fascinating and entertaining compilations of writing by early feminist authors as *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799*, (1985) edited by Moira Ferguson; *English Women's Poetry: Elizabethan to Victorian*, (1990) edited by R. E. Pritchard; and *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen*, (1989) edited by Elspeth Graham et al.

[7] J. C. Smith and Carla Ferstman, *The Castration of Oedipus*, 1996, p 12.

[8] It is ironic, as one valued reader of this paper has good-naturedly pointed out to me, that so-called "liberal" ideologies, which should imply flexibility and a genuine willingness to respect opposing views, are very often more rigid and juridical than the most extreme forms of conservatism — and so the paradoxes of post-modernism take us "round and round and round in the circle game" (with apologies to Joni Mitchell).

[9] Annette Kolodny, "A Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," 1980.

Chapter Two: Some Concepts Central to My Question

Theories of Reading and Literary Criticism

The New Criticism: A Text-Centered View of Reading

I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, T. S. Eliot, and other proponents of New Criticism, writing mostly from the 1920's to the 1950's, recommended an approach to academic criticism and classroom study of literature which emphasized critical objectivity and formal analysis.[1] The New Critics regarded the text as a complete, self-sufficient, and sacrosanct *objet d'art* with an objective, verifiable existence and an absolute value independent of the reader. They argued that critical analysis of a literary work should be confined to a consideration of the words on the page, rather than to what they considered extraneous and irrelevant details such as the biography of the author or the historical, sociological, or psychological conditions surrounding a text's production.

The critical procedures endorsed by the New Criticism relied heavily on explication, or close reading, of the text, and demanded careful attention to the language, symbols, imagery, techniques, and formal devices present in the text itself. The object of such criticism was to analyze and evaluate how these details add to, or detract from, the organic unity, the artistic merit, and the aesthetic impact of the text. These were attributes that the New Critics believed were absolute, transcending such things as time, geography, and ideology, but which in effect made white, male, Anglo-European values and political ideology the transparent standard against which the artistic merit of any text could be measured.

New Critical theory and methodology were extremely influential. The rise of the New Criticism went hand-in-glove with the rapid growth of universities and the establishment of English Literature Studies as a legitimate domain of academic study in the first decades of the twentieth century. Its approach was adopted as the standard framework around which discussions of literature in university, college, and high-school classrooms in Britain and North America were structured at least until the 1970's, and its principles and habits of thinking about literature are still heavily inscribed in teaching strategies,

anthologies of literature, and evaluation practices used in many schools and classrooms at the present time.

Reader-Response Theory: A Reader-Centered View

Since the 1960's, reader-response theorists have been attempting to turn attention away from the "correct" explication of texts, and have instead been working, from a variety of theoretical perspectives, toward a better understanding of the nature of the transaction between a reader and a text. These theorists were an important force in breaking the hold of the New Criticism in the universities, which were dominated by white male academics primarily engaged in reading and reviewing the work of white male authors and critics, and include such writers as Louise Rosenblatt, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Umberto Eco.[2]

As with the New-Critical approaches already discussed, to focus on the main thrusts of reader-response theories is to ignore the specificities and unique contributions of individual theorists and to overlook some important differences and points of divergence. Taken together, however, mainstream reader-response critics have made an enormous contribution to the project of understanding the reader's role in the co-creation of a text, and along with structuralist and poststructuralist theorists of language, they have been instrumental in forcing a drastic re-conceptualization and de-familiarization of such previously taken-for-granted terms as *language*, *text*, *author*, *reader*, and *reading*. As a group, they can also be seen to share an overriding tendency to imagine what they variously label an "ideal," "universal," "transcendent," "model," or "androgynous" reader who works willingly with an author in the process of co-creating the text that the author originally imagined, and who does so with more or less acuity, sophistication, and varying degrees of success.

While these theories do recognize specificities such as race, class, and gender as determiners of individual psychology, and therefore implicitly involved in the reading dynamic, they are also too often oblivious to the existence of *actual* readers who are other than white, middle or upper-class, and male. They fail to recognize that many readers bring background experiences and assumptions to the text that make the transaction a fundamentally different one for her/him than for the privileged, "universal" reader whose job it is to cooperate with the text, and who will find it rewarding and enriching to do so.

Gender is a non-issue for all but a few of these theorists such as Jonathan Culler.[3] Umberto Eco argues very eloquently for the need to distinguish between the empirical author of a text, its narrator, and its "model" author, who is, he claims, an ungendered being. He maintains that Mary Anne Evans, the flesh and blood living being, was a *she*, but that George Eliot, the author, has no gender.[4] He further asserts that the voice in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* is "a voice without body or sex or any history."[5] I do appreciate the point he makes, that the "real" writer assumes a voice which is both fabricated and disembodied. The author may then adopt another voice as a narrator or speaking persona. Although the author who writes *Six Walks* may not be identical with Umberto Eco the man, I would argue that this authorial voice is obviously *not* ahistorical, disembodied, or asexual, especially when I consider how difficult it would be to imagine attaching the voice in *Six Walks* to the image of a black person or a woman—in fact, to anybody besides a white, European, highly educated and privileged male academic.

Eco does believe that the text is a co-creation, but his description of the "model" reader speaks volumes about how he envisions the reader and the hierarchical relationship between reader and text. He believes that the best reader (his "ideal" or "model" reader, the one whom "the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create") will, enthusiastically and with the aid of a fund of shared knowledge and accumulated expertise, cooperate with the author in the creation of the "correct" text—that is, the one that the author had in mind.[6] By doing so, he dismisses as illegitimate and irrelevant any number of readings, and thereby readers, coming from backgrounds and/or experiences which in many cases will differ significantly from the author's.

In this view, if the literary establishment had stamped the text as "valuable" or "important," such a "mis(sed)reading" almost always reflects poorly on the naïve, uninformed, or wilfully recalcitrant reader. Particularly in an educational setting, the author's text is not normally judged as a faulty, flawed, or inappropriate text for a specific reader or group of readers once it has been deemed to be generally appropriate based on the readers' average age and an assumed general and shared level of reading expertise or competence.

Feminist Literary Theory: A Sexed/Gendered View

Feminist literary theories are closely related to reader-response theories and share many genealogical ties. In my view, the relationship between the two traditions (in terms of its history, its nature, and the direction of influence) is not nearly as clear or as direct as it might appear in some views. Many feminists, although they would not likely have referred to themselves by that name, have recognized and fought to reconcile the troubled relationship between women and the literary establishment for much longer than reader-response theorists have been advocating their views about reading. Reader-response theories (along with many others including structuralism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis) have almost certainly theoretically legitimated and provided an impetus for work that had been going on since the seventeenth century, and may have in part accounted for the huge growth in the field of feminist literary theory since the 1960's.

Although they may dispute some important philosophical, epistomological, and political issues, advocates of both theoretical orientations have asked that recognition of the (author)ity of the reader be recognized along with that of the nominal author of the text. Feminist literary theories, broadly speaking, have attempted to correct and compensate for the exclusions and distortions of other literary perspectives by foregrounding the very real biological, material, and phenomenological differences between men's and women's lives. One important feminist aim has been to further our understanding of how these differences have functioned to shape men's and women's relationship to texts, and to the kinds of knowledges embodied in these texts, in fundamentally different ways. Another equally important goal has been to interrogate the prevalence of institutionally sanctioned male supremacy throughout western history and cultures at least since ancient Greek civilization, in particular as reflected in and perpetuated by conditions of literary production, publication, and academic literary criticism.[7]

As I have indicated elsewhere, these theories have been diversely and ably represented by women for more than two centuries. In this century, Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) and Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*, 1929) are influential precursors of modern feminism. As a concerted political effort, feminist literary criticism only became firmly established in the latter half of this century. Such authors as Mary

Ellman, Kate Millett, Judith Fetterley, Adrienne Rich, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Jonathan Culler and Patrocinio Schweickart (to mention just a few of the more influential names) have been instrumental in shifting our thinking about the nature of sex/gender, the hierarchical relationship of sexed/gendered beings in patriarchal western culture, the relative contributions of male and female authors, and how an author's sex/gender impacts her(his) relationship to what has historically been a predominantly white male literary establishment.[8]

Psychoanalytic Explanations of Sex/Gender, Literature, and Reading

The overlap and the spaces between these various schools of thought have been the source of a great deal of productive and sometimes choleric dialogue, but they share one basic assumption that I believe limits their explanatory potential. This assumption is that writing and reading imaginative literature are almost entirely conscious and rational processes. Theorists working within any of the above theoretical frameworks tend to conceive of an author or a reader as an individual who is more or less aware of the intentions, motives and desires embodied in and evoked by a text and who consequently possesses the ability to analyze, define, and control what it does to and for them and what they do to and with it.

There is, however, another large body of writing that tends to confound this view. Psychoanalytic theories of reading, especially psychoanalytic theories allied with and reacting against post-structuralist conceptions of language and subjectivity, mistrust the notion that either the author or the reader of a text can determine with any assurance what the text says or means. One very influential theorist in this respect is Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst who re-visioned Sigmund Freud's work during the half-century from 1930 to 1980. As with the relationship between feminism and reader-response theories, the connections between post-structuralist theories and Lacanian psychoanalysis are not always amicable and the lines of influence are not often clear. What is clear is that a radical redefinition of the nature and the role of language as it constitutes and is constituted by subjectivity is axial both to Lacan's psychoanalytic theories and to the work of poststructuralist theorists such as Jaques Derrida.[9] Various theorists have built on this work, adapted it, and taken it in diverse directions. Some, in whom I am particularly interested, have done so with a strong feminist sensitivity.[10]

These theorists view with scepticism any approach to literature which is based on the premise that what an author intends to say corresponds neatly and transparently to the text itself or the effect that the text produces in a reader. They dispute the contention that the only proper matter of a critical appraisal is the text's manifest and intentional content. They hold this view despite the disapproving noises made by writers such as Umberto Eco, who cautions against what he calls "over-interpretation," by which, I take it, he means not showing a proper respect for an author's work. He disapproves of readers who "use the text as a container for their own passions, which may come from outside the text or which the text may arouse by chance."[11] He compares such a reader with a friend of his who went for a walk in a public wood and became so absorbed in his private thoughts that his senses did not register the wood itself:

> What had happened to my friend? He had sought in the wood something that was instead a private memory. It is right for me while walking in the wood to use every experience and every discovery to learn about life, about the past and the future. But since a wood is created for everybody, I must not look there for facts and sentiments which concern only myself. [12]

Although he is very interested in the psychic processes that determine how a reader makes meaning from a text, he begins with the assumption, in much the same way as the New Critics did, that the author has created a work of art which deserves respect and attention for itself, not for what the reader needs or wants from it.

Regardless of dictums such as Eco's concerning "correct" interpretative practice, psychoanalytic theories recognize that in fact, our first encounter with a text does not normally follow the rules of "good" (i.e., rational and intellectual) academic criticism. As much as our understanding and our appreciation of a work of literature can be enormously enhanced by approaches that focus on appreciating and evaluating the text as a work of art, these theories are unable to explain the primary and often the most enduring reasons that a text grabs us, stays with us, or shifts our construction of ourselves and of the world in some important way. This argument is convincingly articulated in a relatively early article on the subject by Marshall Alcorn and Mark Bracher.[13]
Psychoanalytic critical theories are relatively new and are, in many ways, an inexact and even "unscientific" project riddled with blind spots and limitations. They do, however,

provide us with a framework and a vocabulary to begin to formulate new understandings about *why* we respond in a particular way to a given literary text, rather than simply accepting and/or describing these responses which include attitudes, preconceptions, and instinctual agreement with or resistance to a text's representation of gender.

Psychoanalytic Explanations of Sexed/gendered Identity

It has become apparent that before I can ask any significant question or questions about sex/gender, I must first unpack and deconstruct the notion of sex/gender itself. Theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Nancy Chodorow, Jonathan Culler, and Judith Butler, each from her/his specific scientific, ideological and political perspective, have demonstrated that this undertaking is anything but the simple and scientific categorization of human beings into one of two mutually exclusive biological categories—male or female—on the basis of counting the number of X chromosomes in their genetic makeup. I need to consider the implications of convincing evidence that there are not only two sex/genders available which are naturally, transparently, and inevitably—albeit mysteriously—conjoined to biological sex. In this way, the project has become much more complicated than it might at first seem, and it has forced me to look for enlightenment in disparate areas.

The spectrum of psychoanalytic theories engendered by Freud's innovative and radical formulations of the unconscious, repression, the Oedipal passage, and the dynamics of infantile sexuality encompasses a wide range of sometimes murky, contradictory, and hotly disputed notions. These theories have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the mechanisms by which an infant constructs an identity that is always and necessarily a sexed/gendered identity. Although they describe the specific mechanisms and the consequences of this fact in different ways, psychoanalytic theories argue, almost unanimously and very convincingly, that identity is not an originally androgynous entity onto which sex/gender is at some point and in some manner overlaid or grafted. Rather, sex/gender is at the same time an antecedent and a product of the biological, scientific, medical, psychological, and sociological definitions and discourses that surround and attach themselves to sex/gender.[14]

Psychoanalytic theories struggle with some of the most fundamental and complex issues in human development. They attempt, in various ways, to describe and explain

what the unconscious mind is and why it comes into being; how it is structured and how it expresses itself; the mechanisms whereby an infant recognizes her/himself as a gendered being; and how s/he becomes able to formulate the notion of a "self" as an entity separate from and independent of the primary caregiver.[15] They try to identify not only how we come to know that we are either "boy" or "girl," but what this means in terms of individual psychology and social hierarchies of dominance and subordination that arise out of what they see as an intrinsically and unavoidably asymmetrical dynamic of sexualization/genderization.[16]

This is true, in general, whether specific theories are derived from the Freudian tradition or from one of the many other strands of psychoanalytic thought.[17] They all agree (if on little else) that the formation of a gendered identity, although never fixed or complete, is fairly well established at an early stage of development—at approximately the same time that the infant acquires language. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory proposes that this happens not just at the same time, but as a direct consequence of what Lacan terms the mirror stage and the acquisition of language.

Although these theorists may disagree about the specific dynamics, the terminology, and the respective roles played by the mother, the father, language, and society at large, they do share some common understandings. They agree that the formation of a sexed/gendered identity is inextricably tied (as both cause and effect) to a primary Oedipal crisis whereby the infant is forced to differentiate itself from a nurturing caregiver. Stated very simplistically and perhaps inadequately, the process as they see it goes something like this: The trauma of being compelled to relinquish the illusory notion that the infant and caregiver together constitute a continuous, complete, and self-sufficient unity only becomes manageable through the dynamic of repression. Repression is both a functional and a structural response to such a trauma whereby the conscious mind refuses to admit a disturbing thought, feeling, or image. This refusal necessitates the formation of the unconscious, which these theories visualize as a repository of all of the sensory impressions, desires, and fears that are deemed unacceptable and rejected or pushed out of the reach of awareness—i.e., repressed—by our conscious mind. This repository, or locked memory-box, contains the neurological and somatic traces of every sensory impression that the individual has ever encountered.[18]

It is only rarely, during moments when, for one reason or another, the conscious mind relaxes its vigilance (as during dreaming, psychosis, hallucination, deep hypnosis, or apparently meaningless behaviors that can be seen, only in retrospect, as intentional and meaningful), that the contents of this box work their way upward, creating fissures and disruptions in the thin, deceptively smooth veneer which overlays the gaps, cracks, and contradictions in the unconscious. In people whose behavior and thought processes are considered "normal" (which is to say, people in whom the boundary between the conscious and unconscious minds is properly socialized to be relatively fixed and impermeable) these disruptions generally take the form of dreams, jokes, unintentional acts, and slips of the tongue.

Another way in which these fissures reveal themselves and can be accessed, however, is through imaginative print and visual texts. This is an important consideration for the purposes of my study. I would argue that one of the more significant functions of fictional texts is the limited access which they allow to the unconscious. Psychoanalytic theories have been applied to literary criticism since the 1920s, when Sigmund Freud developed them and explored their relationship to fiction.[19] They recognize that fiction is a manifestation of a great deal more than what the author consciously knows and intends, and that reading is more than simply reconstructing the literal meaning of a text by matching words with images of their stable referents in the empirical world. This view of literature acknowledges the primary processes of the unconscious—substitution of one image, idea, action or feeling for another through condensation, displacement, and symbolism—as essential, if often invisible, components of any engagement with an imaginative text. These are key concepts which can help to explain the richness, the depths, and the potential pleasure or frustration offered by an encounter with a fictional text for both an author and a reader. Viewed in this way, literature can be seen as a means of confronting, handling, and/or negotiating our most basic impulses, needs and desires (although these are often consciously inaccessible or incomprehensible) as if with hands protected by asbestos gloves. Recognizing the split between conscious, preconscious, and unconscious levels of knowledge, and the censorial nature of the channels of communication between them, can help to explain why most of us can and do hold such ambivalent and contradictory beliefs about sex/gender. It also explains why, for the most

part, we aren't terribly bothered by, and may even be completely oblivious to, these contradictions.

Psychoanalytic Theorization of Sex/Gender Vs. Political, Historical and Cultural Realities of Sex/Gender.

While it is essential to remember that the experience of sex/gender is never unitary or self-evident, I will, for the moment, collapse cultural, psychological, and biologistic definitions of sex/gender for the purpose of making some very general statements about the effects of the historical, cultural, and political conventions by which human beings are labeled, and encouraged to recognize and label other human beings, as boy or girl from a very early age and without a great deal of deliberation or discussion.

I am persuaded by the work of feminist literary theorists such as Virginia Woolf , Judith Fetterley, Jonathan Culler, and Patrocinio Schweickart, which is widely accepted, convincing, and difficult to dismiss or ignore, that girls learn to read and to use language in a way that is quite different from the way that boys do in at least *one* important respect. It seems clear to me that our understanding of the complex intrapsychic, interpersonal, familial, and social/cultural forces from which patriarchy originates and through which it is supported and perpetuated is still vague and incomplete. However, what has become abundantly clear is that both girls and boys are encouraged to value and admire the traits that have been assigned to the "masculine" column of gendered attributes simply by virtue of being born into a world in which masculinity is defined (even if only as an unattainable ideal) as embodying such highly valued traits as rationality and logic rather than emotion and intuition; active exploration and mastery of the environment rather than docility and passive acquiescence to it; and authoritative/effectual/strong speech rather than conciliatory/ineffectual/hysterical/weak speech. Of even greater import is that traits in the "feminine" column are much more likely to be rejected and despised by both boys and girls. In the Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition, sex/gender has been conceptualized as a binary, asymmetrical opposition. It seems to me that one of the major challenges for contemporary feminisms is the need to recognize the concrete effects and counteract the political implications of this hierarchical structure while at the same time refusing to battle these effects by allowing ourselves to be caught up in the same binary definitions and modes of thinking that we are attempting to break down.

Explanations of the process by which biologically sexed human beings come to construct identities around which certain gendered attributes coalesce and others are rejected as "not me" are at best contradictory, confusing and incomplete. It has been convincingly argued, however, that our culture's overvaluation of those traits which cluster on the male, or positive, side of the balance sheet encourages both boys and girls to accept male experience as more significant, more valid, and more indicative of some abstract "universal" human experience which transcends gender than female experience does. As a consequence, girls in this culture are predisposed to experience the world in a way that involves some degree of negotiation, compromise, or conflict between the meanings and the value attached to their own personal experience of gender and the simultaneous recognition of, identification with, and introjection of (at least on some level) more public, highly valued, and more immediately gainful or advantageous meanings attached to male experience.

Over the last two or three decades, editors, publishers, and educators have made a concerted effort to ensure that school literature anthologies more accurately reflect, with respect to gender and culture, the diversity of authors, experiences, and perspectives which make up our increasingly polyglot society. This being said, however, much of the literature offered to adolescents in our schools has traditionally been, and continues to be, selected from an Anglo-European and North American canon of literature written by males for an assumed male readership and centered around male activities, themes, and interests. Re-reading some of the poetry, for example, represented in school anthologies by poets such as Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats, and Robert Browning has given me a fresh appreciation of the extent to which women in literature are textually constructed as objects of male desire, hope, despair, and fear—objects of desire because they are imagined as possessing the power to remedy the sense of loss or lack that the Oedipal passage necessarily creates; objects of hope because they are seen as being born with a greater capacity than men possess for love, compassion, nurturance, and understanding (all the qualities traditionally attributed to mothers and wives); and objects of despair and fear because they have the power to grant or to withhold these things and they are seen as possessing the capacity to castrate, emasculate, or revoke the male's sense of self-worth.

Women appear in many male-authored literary works as either eternally young, beautiful, and perfect (Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," Thomas Hardy's "Casterbridge Fair" and W. B. Yeats' "Wandering Aengus"), or as aging, faded crones who have betrayed their husbands and lovers by relinquishing their youth and beauty. This often appears to be felt as a deliberate affront to a man, who deserves a woman who mirrors an image of himself that he wants to see. As Virginia Woolf so elegantly puts it, "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."[20]

Because of this preponderance of male writing, writers, themes, and critics (among other factors which are less easily identifiable but perhaps more constitutive of these phenomena) girls have developed the ability to put themselves (imaginatively) behind the eyes of the male author or protagonist of a text, even when it might mean devaluing, ignoring, distorting, or falsifying their own experience or the experience of a female character in a text. Their reading position as females encourages them to impose what they know and what they expect or want to see on the written word in order to create a text that is comprehensible and harmonious rather than disconcerting, and so create a story that satisfies or pleases. Research has suggested that, in broad general terms, males don't identify with female protagonists to the same extent that the reverse is true, nor do they feel the need to set aside or devalue aspects of their gendered identity in order to enter fully into a text.[21]

One very striking example of this tendency in my own reading was my experience with a recent rereading of *Jane Eyre*. It came as a shock to me when I noticed several aspects of the text that I had previously read right through because I was anticipating, and actively creating, a certain kind of experience. I had recognized in Jane a model of good, virtuous, chaste womanhood, and Bertha Mason as the embodiment of everything that is mad, bad, sexually aggressive and abject about a woman who cannot or will not define herself according to what males need her to be. Until my latest reading, I was oblivious to some extremely unattractive, disturbing, and thoroughly unromantic aspects of Rochester's personality and his behavior which now leap to the foreground and have drastically altered my relationship to the novel. His paternalistic and demeaning treatment of Jane and the other women in the text was rendered invisible for me because to

recognize it would have interfered with my reading of the novel as romance and Jane's marriage to Rochester as a satisfying ending to Jane's story.

A closer and a more critical reading of *Jane Eyre* provides, for me, an accurate and shockingly insightful portrayal of the psychological mechanisms and manifestations of the relationship between a stereotypical male abuser and his complicit and willing victim. Rochester repeatedly refuses to hear what Jane says when she speaks; he deliberately distorts and misrepresents what he does hear; he bullies and manipulates her; and he attempts to make her feel guilty and responsible for his crimes. He demands that she become something that we know, he knows (at least on some level), and Jane never doubts, he will come to despise as not good enough for him. These are all depressingly familiar ploys that men have used to victimize women and to make them believe that cruelty and insensitivity are bonded to love and caring as inseparably as opposing aspects of a single coin.

Rochester expects and demands, in spite of his protestations to the contrary and his efforts to undermine her resolution, that Jane remain steadfastly and heroically virtuous. She must repress her sexual impulses while he aggressively assumes the male prerogative of acting upon his own passions and impulses, which he claims to be unable to resist or even understand. He is disgusted by Bertha's honesty about her sexual appetites and her refusal to fashion herself to his definition of chaste femininity. When his desires are frustrated, his behavior becomes erratic, eccentric, narcissistic, cruel, and anti-social (whether the object that he can't have is Céline Varens or Jane), and is strikingly similar to behavior that is labeled madness in Bertha Mason. All of this adds up to a repugnant picture of a man whom Jane fears could become violent and abusive if not managed with womanly sensitivity and with a woman's instinctual knowledge of the most effective and safest ways to manipulate him (i.e., an artful and deliberate combination of dignity, resolve, archness, tears, and abject supplication).

There are many forces at work that combine to produce and reproduce just such a predictable response to *Jane Eyre* and which can guarantee that this type of book will sell and that it, or the thousands of variations of this story, will be read and enjoyed by generations of preponderantly female readers. It is no secret that the novels produced and sold by publishing houses such as *Harlequin* and *Silhouette* are structured according to

rigid formulas based on a narrow range of male and female physical types, personality traits, settings, and plot lines. These hugely successful publishers sometimes understand and respect the power of the reader's unconscious impulses and fantasies better than we as teachers of literature do. Rochester is held up as one romantic ideal of the "manly" man, created out of, and consequently appealing to, an archetypal feminine fantasy that requires a particular kind of hero—a dark, mysterious, brooding man, suffering from some vaguely defined mental torment. He is cruel, testy, abrupt, and changeable, which only increases his appeal, because we know that the heroine can and will break through these defenses to reach and touch the hero's hidden vulnerability.

Bronwyn Davies discusses the pull of the old romantic story lines such as the one that we see in *Jane Eyre*, and argues that their ability to "hook" women lies in offering them choices that are not choices at all, because alternative story lines have not been developed and made accessible to women.[22] She talks about herself at twenty, and explores why she took up the position of romantic heroine who marries and has three children with an abusive ex-convict because she believes that her love can redeem him. She is no longer so puzzled by her choice when she examines the various discourses and subject positions that were made available to her. According to Davies' parents and her community, war heroes who saved lives were glorified, but women could not be war heroes, except as nurses. To her family, nurses were promiscuous, so she had to find another way to sacrifice herself, which was to marry and attempt to rescue a damaged man who needed her.

> The romantic story lines through which I interpreted my life are one of the lived realities of the male/female dualism and they work to hold that dualism in place. Within the terms of these romantic story lines, the desire to correctly constitute oneself as woman entails taking up as one's own oppressive subject positions that none would ever rationally choose. The "choice" arises from one's history in the world as female/woman/feminine.[23]

It seems to me that Davies' autobiographical explanation for her choice of a partner is still much too rational and too sociological and that it doesn't go nearly far enough in tracing the ways by which these story lines are introjected and become the relatively stable but not immutable psychic structures which become the means for organizing and

interpreting new experiences and perceptions. However, her work does point out that the roots of any major life decision lie far beneath, and are often not accessible to, the mental processes that have been, almost exclusively, the province of education. She believes that our best hope at the moment for deconstructing and resisting these old stories and creating new, more empowering ones lies in a poststructuralist understanding of the textually and discursively produced nature of identity.

Davies' work surfaced some questions for me that Jean Wyatt does a masterful job of tackling. Although Wyatt's work was published earlier than Davies', Wyatt appears to me to extend Davies' project in some important ways and does what I find to be a commendable job of exploring some of the questions that surfaced for me on reading Davies' work. Wyatt sets herself the task of exploring the reciprocal relationship between an identity which is always multiple and divided, unconscious fantasy structures, and fiction. She attends specifically to the question of whether/how fiction can tap into and alter pre-Oedipal fantasies and desires which play a constitutive role in perpetuating patterns of family and social relationships that can be limiting for girls and women:

> If persons were only what Western culture mirrors back to us—coherent selves, unique and consistent "individuals"—we would presumably be entirely subject to the cultural values that surround us from birth. But because each of us is simultaneously a subject constructed by social discourse and the locus of an "other scene" where different desires play and different cognitive possibilities arise, there is in everyone a source of contradictory energy capable of challenging social formations—including the social formation of one's own conscious self. [24]

The pre-oedipal fantasies and desires that she speaks of are apparently roughly equivalent to what Lacan speaks of as the *imaginary*.

Conflicts, Contradictions, and Complications Inherent in a Discussion of Gendered Responses to Literature

D. N. Rodowick, Toril Moi, Janet Sayers, Lynne Segal, and Judith Butler are among the many theorists who have pointed out the limitations and the difficulties which remain unaddressed by existing dualistic definitions of sex/gender and who insist that the terms "male" and "female" are imprecise, misleading, and not very useful as labels.[25] To speak

as if there is something absolute and irreducible that distinguishes male from female experience requires that we ignore the complicated ways in which many individuals are inadequately contained/described by either of these two inelastic and totalizing labels. It becomes impossible to avoid or ignore them, however, when we remember that our society has functioned and continues to function on the premise that human beings and human experience can be divided into two stable, identifiable, and mutually exclusive categories and that the majority of us learn to recognize, and to recognize ourselves as, either "boy" or "girl" at a very early stage in our development. Feminist literary theorists have pointed out that an individual's relationship to reading is shaped very differently as a result of embodying, internalizing, and/or being assigned to one of these two sexed/gendered subject positions. These theorists, male and female, have argued for some time that females learn to read with an awareness of both male and female realities, while males do not learn to read with the same sensitivity to a range of female experience.[26] A number of historical, cultural, and psychological influences converge to shape male readers who are predisposed to denigrate, dismiss, and devalue those characters, traits, opinions, emotions, and/or perspectives that do not mirror a properly "masculine" worldview. They approach a text with a narrower spectrum of possible points of contact and decide quite quickly whether to accept or reject the text, in whole or in part, mainly because they have assimilated a belief system which says they have the authority and the power to insist on seeing themselves in a text.

Females, who have more typically assimilated a position of subordination, cannot afford to underrate, dismiss, or ignore knowledge about male thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In the past, and to a lesser extent even now, female dependence on males for material support has provided pragmatic and compelling reasons for women to learn everything possible about the males (fathers, husbands, brothers, church leaders, politicians, businessmen) who controlled their lives. Their survival often depended on their ability to read and interpret the male mind. Because, until fairly recently, they have not had the same rights and freedoms as men, women learned to protect themselves by studying men. They became very sensitive to how men thought, felt, and behaved, and used this knowledge to manipulate men and to subvert male power over them.[27] This adaptive response of an oppressed group toward the oppressor is well-accepted

psychological theory which has been discussed at length by post-colonial theorists of the psychology of domination and oppression such as Frantz Fanon.[28]

As both feminist and post-colonial theorists argue, just because the outward, visible structures of oppression are dismantled, this does not mean that the oppressed group can or will immediately shed the habits of thought and the psychological mechanisms which allowed them to function with some degree of safety in the old order. Just as the war which abolished slavery in the United States did not end the kind of relationships which had been constituted under slavery, winning the battle to have women legally defined as enfranchised citizens did not automatically bring an end to the psychological reality that women have been and are deeply implicated in creating and maintaining the very structures of their own subordination. This means that women will very often look to men for material support for themselves and children; they will seek male approval and attention, believing that it is worth more in terms of physical safety, economic security, and emotional satisfaction than that of females; and they will continue to believe in the superiority of the male intellect because history has demonstrated its efficacy in shaping and controlling the world.

How this complex web of cultural, historical, political, relational, and intra-psychic dimensions functions to allow or disallow certain subject positions for a particular reader with respect to a particular text, and which encourage a reader to construct certain knowledges rather than others from a text, are at present ill-defined. Reader-response literary theories assume that each individual reader will approach a text differently according to his/her specific psychological makeup and life experience; that the reader is as much the locus of meaning as is the text, and that a reader will accept, reject, resist, or reshape the text based on a unique complex of personal predispositions. These will include race, class, ethnicity, sex/gender, and sexual orientation along with the many other historical, psychological, familial, and sociological specificities that make human beings unique. Such reader-centered approaches recognize that there are many "correct" readings of any text. They often recommend what may claim to be a neutral or value-free critical stance, which is intended to allow readers to find their own points of contact with a text and to form their own moral, ethical, and aesthetic judgments. This view of fiction assigns (author)ity to the reader of a text as well as to the author and the text itself.

However, by placing too great an emphasis on the reader as the site of the creation of meaning, reader-response advocates have been inclined to forget that every text comes equipped with a built-in ideology, whether explicit or not, and the potential to do something *to* the reader. It is a co-construction which is the product of an author's and a reader's values, assumptions, philosophy, and world-view. This is true even if we view words as meaningless in themselves, having no power as marks on a page other than the power that a reader assigns to them. I believe, speaking very generally, that reader-response criticism tends to ignore the role of the text as a site of the reproduction and dissemination of ideology, values, and assumptions about the world. They may encourage us to forget that a text is at least partly "authored" by a living, breathing author who has ideas, thoughts, and desires of her/his own and that every text is the product of a unique historical, socio-cultural, and geographic context. If we pretend that we are not offering or assuming certain explicit or implicit value systems and attitudes with every text we offer or make available to our students, then we will be less apt to focus on encouraging young readers develop the skepticism and the critical skills that will enable them to recognize and resist being shaped and controlled by the interests and the agenda of an author, a curriculum, or a selection process that may be designed to serve or subvert particular interests and to replicate, disrupt, or obscure existing power relations.

There is some danger inherent in an approach to teaching literature that places too much emphasis on the reader as the site of the construction of meaning and not enough on the text. If we believe that there is nothing inherently "in" a text other than what a reader brings to it and if we ignore that the text is the construction of an author who does have certain ideas and attitudes, who is using a language that we do share, and who would not bother to produce a text at all if s/he did not believe that we do use it in similar ways to construct meaning, then we might be leaving the reader at the mercy of the text's invisible agenda, since, in a radically poststructuralist view, it is impossible for language to "mean" anything. Marshall Alcorn argues very persuasively that although a reader may construct an infinite number of interpretations of a text, this set of possible interpretations is a bounded one.[29]

As an example of this tension, I am suspicious of the conclusions drawn by Janice Radway in her analysis of the nature of the interaction between female readers and

romance novels.[30] She concludes that women who read romances may actually be using them in subversive ways to express their resistance to the oppressive realities of their lives, and that these texts might actually work to empower these women. I find it much more likely, however, that for the majority of these women, the text offered a certain pleasure and the woman accepted it, with little or no resistance to the text's implicit ideology. As I read them, these texts seduce a female reader with a very narrow and reactionary definition of woman. Radway does not persuade me that the majority of the women who took part in her study had access to the kinds of discourses and alternative story lines that they would need to be familiar with before they could take up a consciously oppositional reading position.

A recent example of women positioning themselves as readers and deriving pleasure by implicating themselves in their own subordination because a story is so familiar; because the plot taps into a deep well of pleasures, desires, and unmet needs; and because they have been told so often what to expect and what to feel as the plot unfolds, can be seen in the overwhelmingly positive reaction of women to the movie *Pretty Woman* starring Julia Roberts. To me, *Pretty Woman* is a re-visioning of the archetypal rags-to-princess Cinderella story, but with some particularly nasty and misogynist overtones of its own. Because the character that Julia Roberts plays is a feisty, strong, and principled woman who can be seen to "redeem" the rich, handsome leading man, the movie is sometimes construed as a feminist story. Such a reading draws on many of the same romantic impulses that I have pointed to in discussing *Jane Eyre*, but works to make patriarchal oppression even more seductive because it suggests that the heroine has options and makes choices that would have been unavailable to Jane in Victorian England or to a lower-class hooker in a contemporary American city.

My Research Orientation

My understanding of and orientation toward sex/gender, psychoanalytic theory, literature, reading, and, more generally, textuality, come together to form the foundation for my orientation toward my research. My study is, firstly, feminist in its orientation. The term "feminist" is not without its own set of problems, but I use it to mean that one of my primary objectives is that this work should encompass, understand, and respect the diverse range of sexed/gendered investments, subject positions and identities represented

by the students in this one class. I use the label feminist for three main reasons: (1) because the various feminisms share what I believe to be an important emphasis on the politics of sex/gender identity and sex/gender relationships; (2) because a diverse range of feminist theories, ideologies, and stances has succeeded in bringing to the foreground issues related to sex/gender that for so long remained transparent because they were "obviousnesses" and taken-for granted.[31] That is, they formed the "ground"—the shared and common-sense assumptions—against which the "figures"—the patterns by which we make sense of daily life as individuals and as a society—take shape and acquire meaning; and (3) because it is under this umbrella that most theorizing about the meanings and the dynamics of sex/gender is being done.

Secondly, I approach it from a poststructuralist perspective, informed by poststructuralist notions of the connections between language, textuality, subjectivity, and sex/gender, and by psychoanalytic theories of sex/gender (its definition, production and performance) which argue with and extend these poststructuralist tenets.[32] I accept the poststructuralist tenet that the subject does not pre-exist, but is constituted by language, and therefore, that we cannot talk about subjectivity except as it relates to textuality and discourse. I would argue, as Bronwyn Davies does, that we cannot talk about the self in terms of a singular, non-contradictory subjectivity, because we all take up many separate and often competing positions consecutively and simultaneously. There is no such thing as a subject that is not internally conflicted, fragmented, fractured, and divided against itself. I believe, as Davies does, that "Poststructuralist theory thus opens up the possibility of seeing the self as continually constituted through multiple and contradictory discourses that one takes up as one's own in becoming a *speaking subject*"[33]. Psychoanalytic theories, and in particular Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, complicate the notion of subjectivity in still another way. Lacan argues that the subject is not endlessly plural but is in fact divided or *split* because subjectivity and the ego are always formed in relation to difference and alienation—in the mirror stage, the infant acquires a sense that her/his sense of "self" is fundamentally illusionary.

Although my study focuses on students' perceptions and interpretations of the texts I introduced, it cannot accurately or exclusively be called phenomenological. I do not view the students who took part in my study as unitary, rational beings who possess an

authentic and fully formed "self" which exists prior to and independent of language and socialization. Nor do I accept Enlightenment, humanist, or modernist notions which define the self as a stable, coherent core onto which various social roles and identities are grafted, and which can be described as more or less authentic, i.e., closer or farther from the "true" self[34]. I do not approach my study with the belief that I can discover some essential and unvarying "truth" about what participants "really" feel or know about sex/gender and their own position in a society in which the binary division male/female is such a fundamental and determining structure. Rather, I hold that what an individual "knows" or can articulate about her/his values, beliefs, assumptions, knowledges is always contextual, provisional, and incomplete, and often contradictory untrustworthy or misleading. In Lacanian terms, what we can say about ourselves is always founded on a fundamental misrecognition of who we are, what we desire, and why we choose to behave as we do. I do not believe that it would be useful to explore what individuals believe and learn about sex/gender, and how they respond to constructions of sex/gender in a text, entirely on the basis of what they can or will articulate at a given time in response to a specific text or a question that I might ask. To do so, I believe, would demonstrate a naive and unwarranted belief that a subject always knows what they think, feel, mean, or intend. This stance assumes that if I design and use my research instruments properly, if I approach my subjects with tact and respect, if I listen very carefully, and if I scrupulously record what they say, I will gain access to a non-contradictory Truth about their experience and about how they read sex/gender.

Although my research does not rely on my participants' ability to understand and articulate the truth of their experience, neither will it be entirely consistent with critical theory or any other overly-deterministic theory which holds that the individual is entirely shaped by societal forces, institutions, or discourses over which s/he has little or no control. Rather, I believe that human subjectivity is a fluid, ongoing, recursive, and complex process that always includes both capitulation and resistance. It involves reading and interpreting new or unfamiliar texts in terms of the large numbers and wide range of texts with which we are already familiar, and which more often than not provide us with contradictory information. An individual does not use cultural texts, in their numerous forms, to learn to interpret her/his own "actual" or "lived" experience which exists apart

from, and in a more authentic form, than her/his experience with texts. Any and all experience is in itself textual and requires interpretation. We do this in the light of our interpretations of prior texts.

I will not attempt to take up the impossible position of objective, uninvolved, anonymous researcher. This study will be as much about me and about how I understand and read sex/gender as about how the student participants do. Bronwyn Davies suggests that feminism can take much of the credit for forcing men to recognize that the humanist, enlightenment, scientific "myth of the positionless speaker as the one who speaks the most valuable truths," is just that—a myth, and that we all speak from a specific position, whether marked or not.[35] Davies' work follows and reinforces Toril Moi's arguments, which stress that feminist and poststructuralist theories highlight the impossibility of speaking except from a particular position. In this view, it becomes crucial to identify that position:

> Such an emphasis upon the reader's right to learn about the writer's experience strongly supports the basic feminist contention that no criticism is 'value–free,' that we all speak from a specific position shaped by cultural, social, political and personal factors. It is authoritarian and manipulative to present this limited perspective as 'universal,' feminists claim, and the only democratic procedure is to supply the reader with all necessary information about the limitations of one's own perspective at the outset. [36]

At the same time, she recognizes that doing so is more complicated than simply telling readers who I am and what my position is, since I cannot assume that I have unimpeded access to an absolute truth about myself:

> Problems do however arise if we are too sanguine about the actual possibility of making one's own position clear. Hermeneutical theory, for instance, has pointed out that we cannot fully grasp our own 'horizon of understanding': there will always be unstated blindspots, fundamental presuppositions and 'pre-understandings' of which we are unaware. Psychoanalysis furthermore informs us that the most powerful motivations of our psyche often turn out to be the ones we have most deeply repressed. It is therefore difficult to believe that we can ever fully be aware of our own perspective. The prejudices one is

> *able* to formulate consciously are precisely for that reason likely to be the least important ones.[37]

My study wrestles with problems that inevitably arise in exploring a concept that is as abstract and poorly understood as subjectivity. In the introduction to an edited collection of essays dealing with research and subjectivity, Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty discuss the fact that serious researchers have paid so little attention to investigating subjectivity. They suggest a possible reason for this avoidance:

> [M]any sociologists feel repelled or threatened by the unruly content of subjective experiences. They shy away from the investigation of subjectivity in much the same fashion that individuals avoid unpleasant or dangerous activities. Subjectivity can be both unpleasant and dangerous: unpleasant because emotional, cognitive, and physical experiences frequently concern events that, in spite of their importance, are deemed inappropriate topics for polite society (including that of sociologists); dangerous because the workings of subjectivity seem to contradict so much of the rational-actor world-view on which mainstream sociology is premised. [38]

They selected the essays included in their book because the authors represented are not intimidated by the difficulty of the task. They "see lived experience as interpretive rather than a causal story," and "instead of viewing experience as a series of solvable problems," they "attempt to capture and evoke the complex, paradoxical, and mysterious qualities of subjectivity."[39] They characterize the essays in their collection as challenging accepted definitions of subjectivity, experience, textuality, and reading:

> In exploring new territory, these authors have been forced to confront certain questions concerning the production and analysis of textual materials. What is the relationship of fiction to ethnography (Krieger, 1984)? What is the relationship of narratives to lived experience? What is the role of ethnographers' interactions with those they study? . . . How does one decide what to tell others about the analysis of narrative materials, and what considerations govern the selection of texts for the sake of presentation and substantiation. [40]

These are questions that are central to my study, but that I will be approaching from a slightly different direction, by way of definitions that derive from psychoanalytic theories.

Ethical Considerations

These questions that Ellis and Flaherty pose prompt a discussion of some important ethical concerns that I have considered in devising and conducting my study.

(1) Students were not required to participate in my study. Nothing that they read and/or wrote for me was formally evaluated for a final course grade.

(2) This being said, it is also true that any reading or writing that students do in a term is indirectly reflected in their final term grade. I left it to Kim, the classroom teacher, to decide what students would do who chose to opt out of my study. I hoped that they would be assigned alternative activities that would be at least as valuable in terms of meeting the requirements of the course they were registered in as participating in my study would have been.

(3) At the same time, Kim and I agreed that students' course grade would not be adversely affected by my study. The texts, the writing, and the discussions ensuing from my study are all components of the curriculum as the teacher would have implemented it regardless of my involvement in the classroom.

(4) Students chose pseudonyms for themselves, and I have made every reasonable effort to safeguard anonymity and confidentiality.

(5) I have attempted to keep my research position clearly in mind: My focus is on interpreting the texts that students produced, *not* psychoanalyzing the students who participated in my study.

(6) I have, in consultation with the classroom teacher and my supervisory committee, structured my study with a concern for students' psychological safety. I have not anticipated, expected, or demanded that students share, orally or in writing, anything that they were not comfortable sharing. I assured them that anything/everything that they chose to say about a text would be interesting and valuable information for me.

(7) I shared the purpose of my investigation with them and shared my preliminary findings with them in the depth and detail that the teacher and I decided together would be appropriate.

Notes: Chapter Two

1 See I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929); John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (1941); Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947); Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943); W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (1954); and various critical essays by T. S. Eliot.

2 Some of the most influential texts formulating Reader-response and reception theories are Louise Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978); Norman Holland's *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968); Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980); Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (1974) and *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978); and Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader* (trans. 1979) and *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994).

3 Jonathan Culler, "Reading as a Woman" (1982).

4 Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, 1994, p. 14.

5 *ibid*, p. 25.

6 *ibid*, p. 9

7 According to jan jagodzinski ("Curriculum as Felt Through Six layers of an Aesthetically Embodied Skin: The Arch-Writing on the Body," 1992), patriarchy emerged and became entrenched in Greek philosophy and epistemology between 3100 and 600 B.C., and consequently, via the Greeks, in the modern Western technical-rational world-view.

8 A partial list of these works that have mushroomed since the middle of this century includes Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968); Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969); Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (1978) and "Reading About Reading" (1986); Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken" (1971); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979); Jonathan Culler's "Reading as a Woman" (1982); and Patrocinio Schweickart's "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" (1989).

9 Lacan's work informs and is informed by such works as Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1978); Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969); and Roland Barthes "The Death of the Author" (1968).

10 Among the more influential works exploring the meaning of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories for feminism are Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* (1982); Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975); Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction* (1982); Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985); Nancy Chodorow's *Feminism and*

Psychoanalytic Theory (1989); Janet Sayers's *Sexual Contradictions* (1986); and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).

[11] Umberto Eco, 1994, p. 8.

[12] *ibid*, p. 9.

[13] Marshall Alcorn, Jr., and Mark Bracher, "Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of the Self: A New Direction in Reader-Response Theory," 1985.

[14] A few theorists such as Heinz Kohut attempt to sidestep some irksome difficulties by conceptualizing gender as an overlay on an original identity that comes into being without regard to sexual difference, but this seems to me to simply ignore the inherent complexities that any discussion of sex/gender must take into account.

[15] Almost without exception, these theories assume a male infant. They paint a picture of a son caught in a love triangle between his mother and his father, and extrapolate from him to the female infant (if at all) through a process of defining girl as the boy's "other" or minus-male, and explaining her deficiency in terms of lacking a penis (or the phallus, although this term seems to me to have been deliberately appropriated by Jacques Lacan in an attempt to obscure the misogynist bias that permeates psychoanalytic theory).

[16] See J. C. Smith and Carla Ferstman, 1996.

[17] See, for example, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982); Janet Sayers's *Sexual Contradictions* (1986); Nancy Chodorow's *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989); Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990); and Valerie Walkerdine's "Femininity as Performance" (1994).

[18] One of the most poignant metaphors for this phenomenon that I have encountered is in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, in which Paul D talks about the tobacco tin in his chest which holds memories of his life as a slave, and a run-away slave. He can no longer access these memories or feelings because he has refused to look at its contents for so long that the tobacco tin has rusted shut. When Beloved manages to pry it open, the result is traumatic in the extreme for Paul D.

[19] Psychoanalytic literary theories have been represented and developed by writers such as Norman N. Holland, Elizabeth Wright, Juliet Mitchell, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

[20] Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," 1929, p. 45.

[21] See Dale Spender (1985), Judith Fetterley (1978, 1986), Jonathan Culler (1982), Patrocinio Schweickart (1989).

[22] Bronwyn Davies, "Women's Subjectivity and Feminist Stories," 1992.

[23] *ibid*, p. 61.

[24] Jean Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire*, 1990, p. 2.

[25] See D. N. Rodowick (1982), Toril Moi (1985), Janet Sayers (1986), Lynne Segal (1990), and Judith Butler (1992).

[26] See Kate Millett (1969), Ellen Moers (1976), Judith Fetterley (1978, 1986); Jonathan Culler (1982); Dale Spender (1985); and Patrocinio Schweickart (1989).

[27] See Jean Baker-Miller (1986).

[28] See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (1968) and *The Wretched of the Earth*, (1968).

[29] Marshall W. Alcorn *Narcissism and the Literary Libido: Rhetoric, Text, and Subjectivity*, 1994.

[30] Janice Radway "Women Read the Romance: The interaction of Text and Context" (1983) and *Reading The Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (1991)*.

[31] Bronwyn Davies, 1992.

[32] See Jacques Derrida (1966, 1978), Michel Foucault (1969), Madan Sarup (1989), Jonathan Culler (1991), Judith Butler (1990), Valerie Walkerdine (1994), Lynne Joyrich (1995), Bronwyn Davies (1992, 1993), Norman Denzin (1992), Carolyn Ellis and Michael Flaherty (1992), Janet Sayers (1986), D. N. Rodowick (1982, 1991), Lynne Segal (1990) Shoshana Felman (1975), Mary Caputi (1993), Judith Kegan Gardiner (1987) and Jane Flax (1990).

[33] Bronwyn Davies, 1992, p. 57 (emphasis in original).

[34] Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989), Madan Sarup (1989), Bronwyn Davies (1992, 1993).

[35] Bronwyn Davies, 1992, p. 54.

[36] Toril Moi *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1985, p. 43.

[37] *ibid*, p. 44.

[38] Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty, *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, 1992, p. 1.

[39] *ibid*, p. 5.

[40] *ibid*, p. 6

Chapter Three: Sex/Gender, Reading, and Psychoanalytic Theories: A Survey of the Literature

Education and Sex/Gender: Where Are We Now?

Nancy McCracken and Bruce Appleby argue persuasively that the problem of sexism in education is still very much with us. "To some, it might seem that the gender issue has been solved, but in fact, there has been little progress.... The language our children learn carries with it, like a virus, the historical sexist message." They point out that "Research...demonstrates that males and females continue to be socialized differently in schools with what we believe are strong implications for teaching and learning," and that "Research continues to show that as academically successful girls progress through higher grade levels in school, they gradually retreat—unlike successful male students—into a silence born of the conviction that their comments are irrelevant."[1] Most classrooms have been structured to favor the style of conversation that has been genderized as male by which students are asked to report their knowledge, one person at a time, in a competitive series.

The approach to gender inequities which McCracken and Appleby take is very firmly based in a sociological understanding of the self and gender as consisting of roles that individuals slip on or off, and which are very much context-dependent. This role-based view of the self sees its construction as an almost entirely conscious process of imitation and learning, and views gender as something like a mask or a costume that can temporarily disguise, but does not significantly alter, an authentic or coherent "core" self which always pre-exists the mask. A post-structuralist view of the self and of sex/gender takes exception to that view, and instead sees an individual person as embodying multiple selves, all of which are socially constructed and provisional and none of which is necessarily more authentic than another.

Poststructuralist theories also distrust a "rational-actor" view of the self which sees individuals making conscious choices among alternate possibilities, and which tends to overlook what psychoanalytic theories hold as a truth: that much of what we say, do, feel and believe (about sex/gender or anything else) is not accessible to rational understanding. This explains why these thoughts, behaviors, and feelings may embody

glaring contradictions and inconsistencies which might never be recognized as such. Understanding the formation of a gendered identity as the adoption of a learned role that strives toward the possibility of a unified, consistent, harmonious, and cohesive self is an incomplete understanding of a complex process, but research based on this view has nonetheless been important in identifying and drawing attention to culturally sanctioned inequities on the basis of sex/gender.

Ruth Roach Pierson emphasizes the importance of education to the project of changing the existing male/female hierarchy. She says that while the vision and the demands of feminists have changed continuously as gains have been made over the last three hundred years (although these gains have not been a simple matter of uni-directional and linear "progress") the education of girls has always been, and remains today, at the center of the debate.

> Feminists have realized that the perpetuation of a male-dominant sex/gender system has facilitated, and been facilitated by, male control of the production and dissemination of knowledge. And hence feminist critiques of the sex/gender system of their day have necessarily involved educational demands.[2]

Pierson's research has convinced her that feminist critiques began with the demand for access to formal education and to what counted in their day as knowledge, but that over time these demands have grown more radical. In her view, "The increasing radicalization of the feminist critique of education is related to an increasing awareness of the fundamentally gendered nature of society and an increasingly severe critique of the implications of that gendering for human society in its entirety."[3] Although I do agree that feminist demands for educational equality are important and necessary, I also believe that many of the most troublesome and stubborn problems surrounding sex/gender grow, like quack-grass, in the gaps and cracks between the neat paving-stones of formal education. It seems to me hopelessly naive to hope that a "solution" lies in restructuring formal education.

Literature Around Curriculum and Sex/Gender Inequities

Janet Miller argues that traditional, narrow definitions of curriculum function to exclude, silence, and distort the educational experiences of individuals and that

"supposedly 'neutral,' 'objective,' 'unitary,' and 'essential' views of what constitutes our experiences and relationships as males and females to one another as well as to school knowledge" obscure the crucial role that sex/gender plays in determining these relationships.[4] She believes that the "official" definitions of curriculum accepted in many institutions assume that there are certain universally agreed-upon bodies of knowledge that are of most worth, and that those bodies of knowledge and experience do not adequately represent "the concerns, creations, and investments of women, of people of color, of individuals disenfranchised from mainstream versions of knowledge and culture for varied reasons having to do with their perceived relationships or nonrelationships to those versions."[5] In her view, curriculum should be understood not simply as content, but "as content, as an individual's experiencing of that content, and as both the hidden and overt processes and constructions of identities and knowledges within particular social, cultural, and historical moments."[6] She says that we need to think about curriculum both in terms of curriculum materials and classroom interactions, pointing out that in the past, research on gender has focused on content and largely ignored classroom interactions.

She goes on to say that examining both content and classroom interactions in terms of gender equality are valuable and necessary strategies, but that the problem needs to be confronted as symptomatic of the need for more fundamental societal change.

> ... [I]nstitutional structures such as schools and structures of knowledge that hold privileged positions in the schools are not deeply challenged by such strategies. In order to challenge the very discourses and structures of power that produce and are produced by the current gender system, reconceptualized curriculum inquiry attempts to illuminate the deeply imbedded social and educational production of gender and sexuality.[7]

Miller closes with a personal note about the price she paid for becoming a successful student. "I had to talk with others' words, to speak in the modulated, serious tones of others' understandings, to memorize others' stories, to replicate others' knowledge." She adds, "in my ironic desire to please, to receive authorization, I became a person only in relation to someone else's version of how I should be in the world."[8] Her view of classroom discourses as just one element in a complex puzzle seems to me a more useful,

if less optimistic, stance than those researchers who view school socialization as both the major culprit and the site where change must begin.

Literature Around Classroom Practices that Assume and Perpetuate Sex/Gender Stereotypes

Eloise Scott and Heather McCollum summarize some of the contemporary American research that has been done in the area of gender equity and education.[9] Most of their assertions have been widely accepted as commonplace, and they don't raise any new or particularly contentious issues, but they do cite relevant research findings to back their recommendations.

They hold that although there has been legislation in place since 1972 in the U. S. prohibiting sex discrimination in education which has led to improved access to education for women, it has not meant a wider range of career choices for women, nor a decrease in the sex segregation by occupation that accounts for the gap in earning power between men and women. They point out that while family structures have changed dramatically, women's career options and wages have remained remarkably stable.

Scott and McCollum reviewed the results of a broad range of research studies carried out in the area of sex/gender inequities in the classroom. Among these, they report on a 1989 study by Lockheed and Klein which found little difference in the achievement of boys and girls in the early grades, but did find significant gendered differences when they compared certain classroom behaviors. The girls in the classrooms they studied spoke out less and were significantly less disruptive, while the teachers in these classrooms called on girls more often and selectively ignored certain male behaviors.

Scott and McCollum cite the 1982 findings of Hall and Sadler, who reported three phenomena which strongly suggest to me the need for further research in each of these areas: (1) The teachers in their study devalued the work of their female students relative to the work done by boys; (2) They encouraged female helplessness by offering to solve a problem for a girl rather than explaining how to solve it, as they did more often for boys; (3) In postsecondary and adult education classrooms, teachers called on and made eye contact with males more often than females.

A study conducted by Lee and Gropper in 1974 suggested to Scott and McCollum that boys are rewarded for not following teachers' rules and directions by receiving extra

attention. Girls were not given positive attention for rule-following and attending to teachers' instructions. When boys and girls misbehaved, teachers were three times more likely to punish a boy than a girl, and thus continued to give him extra attention for negative behavior.

Scott and McCollum discuss the findings of a 1982 study by Sadker and Sadker, a large and well-known study that played a major role in raising awareness of gender inequities in American classrooms. The Sadkers reported that teachers asked boys more complex and open-ended questions, and were more likely, when helping a boy, to explain how to do something, while they were more likely to complete a project for a girl. Boys were praised more for the intellectual content of their work than girls, and boys were told that low achievement was because of lack of effort, while for girls, this connection was not made. Valerie Walkerdine's recent research and her article "Femininity as Performance" explores in greater depth how the western phallocentric equation of "male" with rationality, curiosity, and creativity works to disallow teachers' perception or definition of girls' high achievement as proof of superior intelligence.[10]

On the basis of the research they looked at, Scott and McCollum arrive at the following disheartening conclusion:

> In summary, research on teacher interactions indicates that teachers' positive reinforcement of "ideal" behaviors and their lack of attention to girls discourages girls from learning more active and assertive learning styles, which in the long run tend to get students farther along.[11]

Michael Allen reports on a study which is a striking example of how gender biases and stereotypes can insert themselves, invisibly and insidiously, into the classroom practices of even the most well-intentioned and fair-minded teachers.[12] I will look at this particular study in some detail because I feel that it demonstrates the perils of attempting to research sex/gender dynamics in the classroom, and also because it demonstrates one approach to interpreting texts that I will use in attempting to uncover data provided by the students in my study that may not be spoken by or visible to them. Allen examined the self-initiated writing done by students in his composition class for an electronic bulletin board, an extra-credit option which he set up so that students could continue class discussions, share ideas about assignments, and talk about their writing. He noted

differences in the ways that male and female students approached this specific communication task, the rhetorical stances they adopted, and their reactions when a clash of personal opinions heightened emotions and created conflict.

Allen maintains that he began the project with a sensitivity to potential problems of gender bias and with some anxiety about how the dynamics of gender would be played out on the board. He was aware that "the interplay of power relationships within the classroom has been a concern of feminist theorists and researchers for some time" and that "increased use of computer or electronic discourse in writing classrooms has added to concerns about such power relationships."[13] He acknowledges that the research he surveyed expressed reservations about the introduction of this technology into classroom practice. The consensus seemed to be that "a small male minority dominates the discourse both in terms of amount of talk, and rhetorically, through self-promotional and adversarial strategies" and that "rather than being democratic, academic CMC [computer-mediated communication] is power-based and hierarchical."[14] He outlines one approach that might follow from this work, and then explains why he rejected it:

> Faced with such findings, some teachers of writing may want to structure their students' use of computer networks so that not only is 'flaming' [harassment, insults, etc.] outlawed, but female students are privileged to compensate for the power-based, patriarchal influences on society. But others [presumably including himself] wonder if placing such limits on electronic discussion would stifle the expression and exchange of ideas we want to encourage[15].

Allen describes his project, provides samples of student "posts" (individual entries on the bulletin board), and analyses a dispute that arose in these exchanges and the way that it was resolved as evidence to support his conclusion that, given the chance, students will resolve such disagreements without intervention. He argues that a female student took charge and did a better job of restoring harmony than he could have and he believes that his findings should be received as a strong endorsement of the use of CMC along with more traditional classroom instruction.

What it shows me, however, is that many of the worries he expressed at the outset were dramatically played out. Males did indeed almost completely initiate, direct, and monopolize the discussions. The self-appointed moderator of the board, whose on-line

pseudonym was "Robin Hood", was a male who was familiar with CMC and the Internet prior to Allen's Project. Robin quickly and firmly established the boundaries and the etiquette of acceptable discourse. Allen says that Robin was an authoritative but egalitarian and enthusiastic moderator:

> Robin became the leader, inviting his classmates to write, answering their questions, and even telling them when they were using the bulletin board for personal messages that could be handled by e-mail.... Unlike other males, Robin made a point of responding to all posts, and responded to female posts when no other male did.[16]

Allen found that messages by males were typically longer, and that three males in particular controlled the content and the direction of the discussions. Of the examples that Allen provides, not only was every topic introduced by a male, but "female posts generally received less response than male posts."[17] He mentions that one female student tried to survey her classmates' opinions on the subject of date rape, but that she consequently abandoned the issue as an essay topic because no males other than Robin responded to her survey. Allen then continues in a vein which minimizes the impact of his own findings and reaches some surprising conclusions. He states that "Robin's public responsiveness may have contributed to a sense of gender equity, which in turn led to greater gender parity in network participation," and that "students seemed unconcerned by the fact that Robin wrote so much."[18] However, there is no indication, either in the text of Allen's study or in the results of a questionnaire (which he includes as an appendix) that students were given the opportunity to express concerns that discussions were very heavily dominated by three male voices.

It is highly ironic that what Allen presents as an exemplar of how electronic communication can lead to increased understanding and acceptance between male and female students in fact shows a male professor allowing a male student to dictate the structure and the tenor of the CMC for all students, implicitly condoning the replication of repressive and stereotypical attitudes about gender. Female students were allowed to contribute their points of view to the discussion, but of the four students who engaged in the most prolonged and heated exchange, and who insisted on the time and their right to defend their positions, only one is female. The girls are placed (or place themselves) in

the all-too-familiar position of reacting to male ideas and deciding what they think and feel in response to an articulated male position. At no time does Allen, their teacher, recognize this as significant or question why it is so (either during the course of his study or later in his writing about the students' bulletin-board interactions). Mary and Sandi-Lee do disagree with statements that Robin and Hawkeye make, but Allen provides no evidence of the existence of a post by a female addressing an issue raised by another female.

Sandi-Lee, the one female who is drawn into an emotionally charged exchange following Robin's post in which he outlines his thoughts for a position paper on restructuring the criminal justice system does so in reaction to Hawkeye's callous and naive statement that the death penalty should be used more often as a simple solution to the problem of crime. As the debate heats up, opinions about the death penalty and state-mandated sterilization of prisoners are offered, attacked, and counter-attacked. The main participants demonstrate that they are primarily interested in defending their position and "winning" the debate. Communication on the board seems to have reached an impasse when Bess steps in and writes a post that reestablishes communication while allowing the combatants to maintain their dignity by asking them to take off their gloves and shake hands:

> Can we let the prison issue rest, since our papers are done now? Thanks!! Some people can be talked to and talked to but they won't change **their** position and you have to know when to stop and just say enough, I've done all I could, so please, no more arguing. I just hate to see people at each other's throats that's all.[19]

Bess's response is stereotypically feminine. She assumes responsibility for protecting everybody's feelings and pleads with her classmates to drop the argument which is threatening to seriously disrupt the established social order. She adopts the essentializing and repressive position of the wise, gentle female peacemaker, possibly because she is cast in that role by her classmates or by Allen's narrative. Men are the originators of philosophical, religious, and political ideas and institutions. They actively test these theories and attempt to force them on others, while women create and maintain the physical, emotional, and psychological support systems that enable them to do so with

some degree of safety. One of the recurring themes in literature is that of the feuding male armies and the patient, anxious women waiting to take care of them when the battle is over, such as *The Trojan Women*; or the conflict between males in a family mediated by the patient, anxious wife or mother who only wants harmony, as in *Death of a Salesman*. These women typically seek ends that will be good for everybody (except, very often, themselves) while men are more often concerned with exercising power over either circumstances or people.

Allen states that he recognized that the students were having a problem that might be serious enough to require his intervention, but that while he was considering how he should respond, the matter was resolved.

> I hesitated, and in that moment Bess asserted herself and changed the network. Bess's post made me see there was value in the students themselves handling the issue before I could. Bess's plea for an end to the argument was clear and effective. That Bess could make such a pained request indicated the freedom she felt to assert her own presence and identity on the network.[20]

He makes optimistic claims, but provides no evidence to support his view that Bess sees herself as a confident, assertive person. The influence that she does have is limited to that voluntarily granted her by the combatants.

It seems to me that Allen's well-intentioned attempt to analyze his students' on-line relationships highlights how difficult it is to reconceptualize the dynamics of gender and power when so many of the contributing and complicating factors have been accepted for so long as neutral, natural, and unproblematic. Allen understands the resolution of the drama he recreates as entirely satisfactory, even though he has clearly demonstrated that Mary, Bess, and Sandi Lee played supporting roles, while Robin Hood, Hawkeye, and Kent used the bulletin board as a means of shaping new ideas, trying them out on their peers, developing rhetorical and leadership skills, and engaging in struggles for power and influence. He sees no problem with the fact that his project presupposed, recognized, and then validated the roles of the young men in his class as the technological experts, the social leaders, and the rational thinkers whose opinions mattered. These are all qualities that our society values very highly, and which Western philosophers since Aristotle have ascribed to men.

The women in Allen's study seem to me to illustrate the phenomenon that Jean Baker Miller identifies. She says that because history has consistently shown that women have not participated fully in "the real world," women have come to believe that this must mean that they cannot, and that therefore, they must lack something that men have. Because they can find no reasonable evidence that men are more intelligent or more competent to explain this, they reconcile the paradox by attributing to men some mystical but necessary quality that they do not possess, and which is essential for success in "real world" arenas such as politics and business. "This element in him becomes increasingly foreign for the woman; it takes on the quality of an almost magical ability that men have and women do not."[21]

Literature Around Sex/Gender and Reading That Assumes Essential Gender Differences

Bruce Appleby reviewed feminist work done in the fields of psychology and sociolinguistics and aligns himself with one school of feminist thought that posits essential differences in the psychology of males and females, and thus in the way they use language.[22] He cites the work done by Nancy Chodorow, whose writing has been influential in popularizing and extending the work of the object relations school of psychoanalytic theorists. Chodorow argues that the pre-linguistic experiences of boys and girls in our culture, in which the primary caregiver is most often the mother, lead to very different ways of being in the world for boys and girls. In her view, a female child learns that she is a girl because she is, in many respects, "like" the mother/female caregiver. She is not forced to establish an identity which is fundamentally different from the female caregiver, and therefore learns that to be female means to stay connected. In order to take on appropriately male gendered attributes, a boy must learn to distance himself from his mother—that is, he learns that to be masculine means to separate from and to see himself as fundamentally different from the primary caregiver, who is almost always female. Chodorow believes that this push toward early individuation and separation for boys, and a greater need for connections and close relationships for girls, are defining factors in the ways that male and females experience the world and learn to "do" gender.

Appleby also cites the work of Carol Gilligan, who argues that moral development is different for women than it is for men. Gilligan makes a strong case that boys focus on

the universal nature of rules rather than the specifics of a particular situation, are less concerned with the effect of these rules on relationships, and tend to emphasize competitive games requiring aggression and strength. Appleby says that "discrimination by gender occurs mainly outside the home, perhaps mostly in school."[23] I find this argument problematic not only because I am unconvinced of the assertion itself, but also because I believe that such a focus obscures the genesis of this discrimination and refuses to recognize it as a product and an extension of everything that children have learned about sex/gender from infancy. He cites research to support an important and valid claim, which is often overlooked, that the impossibility of satisfactorily embodying unrealistic cultural standards of "masculinity" and "femininity" causes severe difficulties for boys as well as girls.

Appleby argues that if we believe that males and females differ in their moral and intellectual development and in their relational capacities and that these differences are gender-related rather than gender-specific, then we should be more conscious of how gender influences language and patterns of social interaction in our classroom. He believes that these differences have important implications in two areas. The first is the use of journals, since males are not as comfortable using journals to formulate and share their ideas, especially if the reader is another male. The second relates to the use of small-group discussion, collaboration, and peer evaluation activities. He questions whether the (masculine) emphasis on competition and ranking in classrooms may be in direct contradiction to (feminine/feminist) teaching strategies that encourage collaboration.

Appleby's conclusion is that we need to find ways to integrate both of these operational styles into our classrooms. "Our problem is how we can promote abstract thinking and higher-order reasoning...and yet maintain and sustain human connections."[24] His conclusion illustrates to me how difficult it is to theorize outside of the false dichotomy that structures most discourses around sex/gender. By insisting on an either/or rather than a both/and approach, and by using his research to argue for the necessity of incorporating two gender-linked language styles into our classrooms, he reifies and perpetuates thinking that indissolubly links masculinity with logic and rationality, and femininity with empathy and emotion.

Cynthia Bowman presents another perspective on the question of what it means for language arts teaching if we accept that there are essential gender differences.[25] She studied learning logs that 120 students (60 boys, 60 girls) kept as they read two novels, *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky) and *The Stranger* (Camus), and the short story "The Lagoon" (Conrad). (I am curious to know why a female teacher with an apparently feminist orientation would use only male-authored texts for her study, and what differences she might have found if she had introduced three female-authored texts.) She analyzed these logs and reached the following seven conclusions about gender differences reflected in the entries:

1. Boys identified and commented on the male characters, girls on the female characters;
2. Girls were more reflective; boys more judgmental;
3. Girls were more ideological, boys more practical;
4. Girls compared the literature to their lives, and to other literature, more often than boys;
5. Boys compared the literature to television and history more than girls;
6. Girls attempted to theorize answers to their own questions more often than boys;
7. Girls were more patient readers.

Bowman found, in general, that the boys in her study displayed many of the traits that have been recognized as stereotypically masculine. Her study reinforces cultural assumptions that girls are more patient, more nurturing, and more willing to consider other points of view, while boys are more judgmental, impatient, concrete, and practical. She observes that "In terms of response to literature, it seems that the girls' journals far better illustrate the goals of a response-centered curriculum as espoused by current theorists."[26] She says that the girls who answered like boys were less academically oriented girls who were not motivated to excel in school. She characterizes them as loners, with few friends, from families with problems. The "crossover" boys were among the best students and were extremely hard workers, often in the top ten percent of the class. These boys seemed to Bowman to be among the more thoughtful, caring and perceptive students who did well in all school subjects and had many positive qualities.

In other words, they seemed to be the more well-adjusted boys, while the girls whose responses were more similar to the boys' appeared to be the least well-adjusted girls.

Bowman reaches this conclusion: "The data from my learning logs seem to suggest that what we must do is try to get boys to read literature and write about it more as the girls do, and at the same time encourage even further development in the girls' work."[27] Her descriptions of masculine and feminine reading styles are heavily evaluative and reflect her belief that a feminine style of responding is richer and more sophisticated. She understands from the students' responses that boys consider English to be a girls' subject and that only the most well-rounded, mature boys are secure enough to add these feminine strategies to their repertoire. She says that she helped some girls to raise their academic standing by encouraging this type of writing, while at the same time she demands that teachers value all learning styles: "We must be open to, and aware of, the differences in genders and create a learning atmosphere which will make our classes meaningful to each unique, individual student."[28] The manifest content of her article is a contradictory plea for gender equity and a suggestion that we should force boys to read and think, or at least respond, more like girls. It seems to me that to truly value a diversity of responses does not mean that boys should read more like girls, especially if, as Bowman contends, the kind of literacy that she values is not highly valued in the business world or in North-American society outside of formal schooling.

Bowman's study raises some thorny questions, which good research should do, but the conclusions she reaches, in my view, need to be turned upside-down and inside-out. Meredith Cherland's study of the reading history and habits of sixth-grade girls is a useful one to look at in conjunction with Bowman's, because Bowman assumes the meanings and purposes of literacy which Cherland interrogates.[29] Cherland makes a crucial distinction between a literacy that is empowering and liberating, and the *dis*empowering effect of certain inadequate forms of literacy that suffice to transmit the dominant ideology and to keep individuals in their proper places, but do not enable a reader to seriously question or imagine alternatives to the status quo.

Cherland examined the reading practices of the girls who took part in her study to determine whether or not the literacy they were acquiring was potentially empowering or

whether these girls were being taught to read in ways that serve the interests of a patriarchal society and in fact limit possibilities for their future:

> As a feminist, my research undertaking has been to both describe the changing subjectivities of the girls I studied, and to consider the forces at work in the construction of those subjectivities. This kind of work, I would hope, may lead us, as educators and researchers, to generate alternative practices and interventions in literacy education.[30]

She advocates social change through radical pedagogies which enable students to think critically about their culture and its institutions and so begin the process of social change.

Literature Around Feminist Literary Theory and Reading

Feminist literary theories have taken many different directions in exploring the troublesome relationships between women and the male-dominated institutions that have governed, and still govern, the production and dissemination of knowledge and literacy. One stream of feminist work has focused on exploring the ways in which sex/gender affects the reading dynamic and has often concentrated on how females are portrayed in literature by men. The work of theorists such as Judith Fetterley and Patrocinio Schweickart has been important in making us aware that reading has been a problematic activity for women, and has been widely accepted as indisputable evidence that images of women in male-authored literature have mirrored and/or helped to create and recreate the subordination of women in modern western cultures.[31]

Researchers such as Laura Obbink, however, maintain that although feminist literary criticism has been extremely influential at an academic level, it has yet to make a real impact on secondary school curriculums and/or teaching strategies:

> Women's voices are still seldom heard by high-school or even college students, for the literary canon—our unofficial list of the 'Great Writers' and the "Great Works"—has not only excluded female voices in the past, but also continues to ignore them, even in the classrooms of the 90s.[32]

Judith Fetterley's feminist analysis of American fiction written by males is a landmark work with a strong political thrust.[33] Her work was based on and illustrates a critical approach that had been used very effectively by Kate Millett and others.[34] It asked and answered some questions about classic, male-authored, American works of fiction

that theorists had not thought to ask, and it provided a model for decoding the explicit and/or implicit messages about sex/gender which any work of fiction embodies and helps to perpetuate. Fetterley feels that it is imperative to analyze textual representations of women in misogynist fiction and to understand how and why they work to implicate women in reading themselves into silence and invisibility. She says that the consequence of reading literature that erases female experience goes much deeper than a loss of identity: "Forced in every way to identify with men, yet incessantly reminded of being a woman, she undergoes a transformation into an 'it,' the dominion of personhood lost indeed."[35]

In a later article, Fetterley states that she has long been struck by the degree to which American texts are self-reflexive. They are filled with scenes of readers and readings, and there are many examples of expert readings and sometimes disastrous misreadings. Susan Glaspell's short story, "A Jury of Her Peers," is to Fetterley a very American story because it is about reading. The theory of reading it proposes is explicitly linked to a theory of sex/gender. "A Jury of Her Peers" tells of a woman who has killed her husband, of the men on the case who cannot solve the mystery of the murder, and of the women accompanying them to the crime scene who readily interpret the evidence:

> The reason for this striking display of masculine incompetence in an arena where men are assumed to be competent derives from the fact that the men in question cannot imagine the story behind the case. They enter the situation bound by a set of powerful assumptions. Prime among these is the equation of textuality with masculine subject and masculine point of view. Thus, it is not simply that the men can not read the text that is placed before them. Rather, they literally can not recognize it as a text because they can not imagine that women have stories.[36]

Nancy Comley takes much the same approach in her reading of, and her research based on, Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp."[37] She reads it as a story that portrays a world in which women and women's experiences are insignificant because they are filtered through a male subjectivity. "Indian Camp" is a short story about a young boy who goes with his father, a doctor, to help an Indian woman who has been in labor for three days. The father performs a crude Caeserian section with a hunting knife and no

anaesthetic while his son watches and the woman screams. The doctor triumphantly delivers a healthy baby boy. When the operation is over, they discover that the woman's husband, who has been in an upper bunk during this procedure, is dead. He has committed suicide by slitting his throat, presumably because he could not bear hearing his wife scream. When the boy asks his father why the woman is screaming, the man's reply is that the screams are not important.

According to one reading (the one that Comley believes Hemingway intended) neither the woman's pain nor the doctor's insensitivity are important or noteworthy. The story is about a boy learning that a woman's suffering is of no consequence, that life is hard, and that the cruelty of such a crude and violent assault on a woman's body is of no consequence relative to the creation of a new life. The woman's screams are irrelevant, except to her husband, whose empathy makes him inadequate as a man and causes him to take his own life.

Comley introduced the story in two college classes, one a freshman composition course and the other an upper-level course in literary theory and criticism. She found that responses of the two groups to "Indian Camp" differed markedly. In the freshman composition class, there were no significant gender differences in the reading, while in the literary theory class, the responses of men and women were noticeably different. In the composition class, three women and no men in a class of twenty registered shock at the violence in the story. In the literary criticism class, a majority of the women immediately mentioned feelings of shock and dismay at the callous dismissal of the mother's suffering.

Comley explains the lack of reaction to the woman's pain by students in the first group, who did not have the exposure to alternative reading strategies and discourses of criticism that the second group did, in this way:

> Faced with a kind of violence that did not fit in their particular frames of knowledge, the student readers naturalized it. In this process, we take strange, and in this case, shocking information and we make it conform to a discourse we understand. And so Hemingway's story was transformed into story-forms the students knew and were comfortable with.[38]

She says that students are over-familiar with violence, particularly violence against women, so they don't respond to it. They read this story in terms of their familiarity with television and movie coming of age stories like "The Wonder Years," which are often about a wise but taciturn father teaching his son how to be a man. She says that "To encourage students to dwell on Nick's 'resolution' of oppositions, and thus to ignore the play of gendered oppositions in the story, is to invite students to lapse into media-oriented banalities."[39]

Patrocinio Schweickart examines the way that mainstream reader-response theorists have conceptualized reading and concludes that the theory is fine as far as it goes, but that it can't adequately explain the nature of the interaction between a specific reader and a text.[40]because it ignores the importance of gender, class, and race, addressing itself to a "universal," white, male, privileged reader. Schweickart illustrates her point with reference to Wayne Booth's address to the 1982 MLA convention. In his speech, Booth talked about his own beginnings as a reader and cited an abridged passage from Malcolm X's book, with ellipses, in which the author describes how he discovered and began devouring books while in prison. Schweickart was curious to see what Booth had omitted as extraneous for his purpose. On checking the original, she found that the omitted passage was a reference to the impact of what he read in the fields of genetics, history, and philosophy and the meaning he constructed from this reading. Booth totally ignored Malcolm X's life experiences—his race, his class, his religion, his political ideology, and his mounting frustration and anger as a result of what he read—and "white"washed him as simply an enthusiastic reader whose story is essentially no different from Booth's.

Schweickart then relates Virginia Woolf's story about a third reader. Mary, the female subject of "A Room of One's own." Mary is a reader whose experience with reading is very different from both Booth's and Malcolm X's. Woolf's Mary is a woman who can find no information about women that is not written by a man, and who discovers that what has been written is contradictory, misleading, and incomplete. After examining these three stories, Schweickart concludes:

> From the standpoint of the second and third stories of reading, Booth's story is utopian. The powers and resources of his hero are equal to the challenges he encounters. At each stage he finds suitable mentors. He is assured by the

> people around him, by the books he reads, by the entire culture, that he is right for the part. His talents and accomplishments are acknowledged and justly rewarded. In short, from the perspective of Malcolm X's and Woolf's stories, Booth's hero is fantastically privileged.[41]

Schweickart insists that reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism in order to adequately take into account and confront the disturbing implications of our historical reality. "Two factors—gender and politics—which are suppressed in the dominant models of reading gain prominence with the advent of a feminist perspective."[42] She reiterates Fetterley's argument about the conflation of the "male" and the "universal" reader, and the resulting exclusion of women.

> Androcentric literature structures the reading experience differently depending on the gender of the reader. For the male reader, the text serves as the meeting ground of the personal and the universal. . . he is invited to validate the equation of maleness with humanity. The male reader feels his affinity with the universal, the paradigmatic human being, precisely because he is male.[43]

Schweickart describes the process of "immasculation," a term coined by Judith Fetterley to describe what happens to women when they are seduced/coerced into entering male-centered texts and adopting a male reading position. Schweickart describes how this happens and then asks why women implicate themselves in this process. "Where does the text get its power to draw us into its designs? Why do some sexist texts remain appealing even after a feminist critique?"[44] She cites Fredric Jameson, who answers that the male text draws its power over the female reader from her unconscious desires, which it rouses and then harnesses to the process of immasculation. To illustrate this point, Schweickert looks at D. H. Lawrence's *Women In Love*. She argues that female readers empathize with the male character because the emotions and behaviors he displays—a desire for autonomy and for love—mirror what we want for ourselves. He is a sexist hero, but the more we identify with his desires, the more we identify with him, and the more intense will be the experience of bifurcation which is characteristic of immasculation.

Schweickart proposes that male texts which are worthwhile, but nevertheless work against a female reader, should be read in a particular way.

> My point is that *certain* (not all) male texts merit a dual hermeneutic: a negative hermeneutic that discloses their complicity with patriarchal ideology, and a positive hermeneutic that recuperates the utopian moment—the authentic kernel—from which they draw a significant portion of their emotional power.[45]

She argues, as we have seen Nancy Comley illustrate with her students' readings of "Indian Camp," that "Taking control of the reading experience means reading the text as it was not meant to be read, in fact, reading it against itself."[46] I believe that both male and female readers would benefit from developing these reading strategies and applying them to *every* text, since we know that stereotypes and false images of both men and women can be found in female-authored as well as male-authored texts.

Jonathan Culler was among the first reader-response theorists to recognize the impossibility of understanding reading without reference to the problems and the complexities introduced when we consider that an individual reader is always and necessarily sexed/gendered. He says that the kinds of experiences that men and women have will inevitably cause them to read and to value texts differently and he suggests that reading as a women is a vastly more complicated notion than it may at first appear. "As Heilbrun suggests, reading as a woman is not necessarily what occurs when a woman reads: women can read, and have read, as men."[47]

He takes the problem of how women read a step further than it had previously been taken by pointing out that, given the nature of existing texts, to read as a woman might well be impossible, since "To ask a woman to read as a woman is in fact a double or divided request. It appeals to the condition of being a woman as if it were a given and simultaneously urges that this condition be created or achieved."[48] Reading as a woman is not simply either a theoretical or a biological position. Women, along with a knowledge of themselves as biologically female, are asked to construct a female gender and to read as gendered, rather than as biological, females, even though the fact of our biological sex is inescapable and always influences our reading in some essential way.

> For a woman to read as a woman is not to repeat an identity or experience that is given but to play a role she constructs with reference to her identity as a woman, which is also a construct, so that the series can continue: a woman

> reading as a woman reading as a woman. The noncoincidence reveals an interval, a division within woman or within any reading subject and the 'experience' of that subject.[49]

The effect of hypothesizing a female reader, according to Culler, "is to reverse the usual situation in which the male is assumed to be sexually neutral, while a feminist reading is seen as a case of special pleading and an attempt to force the text into a predetermined mold."[50]

Culler talks about male anxiety, insecurity, and jealousy around a women's power to reproduce and nurture new life which finds expression in many male-authored texts. He says that if we were to keep these unconscious anxieties in mind and try to imagine what the literary criticism of a patriarchal culture would look like, we could predict several concerns:

> ...(1) that the role of the author would be conceived as a paternal one and any maternal functions deemed valuable would be assimilated to paternity; (2) that much would be invested in paternal authors, to whose credit everything in their textual progeny would redound; (3) that there would be great concern about which meanings were legitimate and which illegitimate..., and that criticism would expend great efforts to develop principles for, on the one hand, determining which meanings were truly the author's own progeny, and on the other hand, controlling intercourse with texts so as to prevent the proliferation of illegitimate interpretations"[51]

Culler's voice was an early and influential one in the development of feminist critical theory, and because his approach is also psychoanalytic, his work provides a useful transition between feminism and psychoanalysis.

Literature Around the Necessity of Considering Psychoanalytic Theories in Conjunction with Reader-Response and Feminist Theories of Reading

Running through the discussions of most feminist theorists, whether or not they mention or recognize it explicitly, is an understanding that sexism and misogyny in literature are not generally intentional, rational, or conscious. For both an author and a reader, misogynist attitudes and other prejudices that we can most easily recognize are by definition the least harmful. Whether we want to accept any of the established

psychoanalytic theories or reject them as irredeemably misogynist, it seems to me that some foundational psychoanalytic tenets must figure in any discussion of where false and harmful images and definitions of femininity and masculinity come from and why they continually reassert themselves as deep and powerful presences in literature alongside and despite modernist/humanist appeals to reason, justice, and equality.

Many theorists who study reading believe that psychoanalytic theory has much to offer in helping to further our understanding of the role that sex/gender plays in the relationship between readers and texts. In her review of several feminist books on the subject, Pamela Caughie explains why she is convinced that psychoanalytic theory holds a key to the project. She begins by quoting Virgina Woolf, who said (I think not entirely facetiously) that she only discovered when she began to write that a woman is not a man. Caughie says that this observation, as obvious as it might at first appear, is what makes the books she has chosen to review different from mainstream reader-response criticism:

> While the 'most eminent critics' in reader-response criticism focus on the reader in order to redefine the literary text (considering the text as a transaction or experience rather than an object) or to redefine the interpretive process (attending to the reader's activity, not just the text's meaning), the writers here focus on the woman reader in order to investigate the ways in which our institutionalized pedagogy, criticism, and aesthetics have ignored gender differences and repressed women. Reader-response criticism calls objectivity into question; these works call neutrality into question (*neutralis*: of neuter gender)...
>
> The hypothesis of a female reader, then, is the distinctive characteristic of the books reviewed here: Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocinio Schweickart's *Gender and Reading* , Mary Jacobus's *Reading Woman,* Naomi Schor's *Breaking the Chain* and *Reading in Detail*, and Barbara Johnson's *A World of Difference.* Together these works challenge the (supposedly) sexually neutral assumptions behind our aesthetic and critical theories and our pedagogical practices, thereby exposing the aporetic conclusions engendered by andropomorphic reader-response criticism. It is in this sense that women

reading may end up reading women, that is, reading "*what is not known* in literature or theory."[52]

She says that the books included in her review share an important concern: "What's at issue in these studies of gender and reading is less the significance of 'reading as a woman' than the point of doing so. All agree that gender makes a difference in reading. The question is, just what difference does it make?"[53]

Caughie begins by discussing the essays in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocinio Schweickart. She found that they contained many important and provocative ideas, but that they all begin with some assumptions about gender and about reading which she finds problematic. Reading that volume in conjunction with four other texts helped her to identify an assumption shared by the authors represented in *Gender and Reading* that she believes is faulty. These texts were Mary Jacobus's *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (1986); *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction* (1985) and *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (1987), both by Naomi Schor; and Barbara Johnson's *A World of Difference* (1987). She says that she found it useful to read Flynn and Schweickart's "seminal collection on gender and reading," with these other texts, because they "confront psychoanalysis and deconstruction, in order to consider the different kinds of differences at issue in any study of gender and reading."[54]

Caughie wonders whether the proper objective, as might reasonably be inferred from the essays in *Gender and Reading*, should be simply to replace androcentric texts and reading practices with gynocentric texts and reading practices. This stance assumes that there is such a thing as "female" experience, and takes for granted that we will always want to enter into a woman writer's heart and mind, while we will resist doing so with every male author. She says that what will keep us from resolving this opposition and achieving a universal consensus as feminist readers is not the politics of our criticism, but our conflicting theories of the text: "Since one's concept of the reader is bound up with one's concept of the text, textuality is as much at issue in gender and reading as is gender itself."[55] She says that to the language of politics in *Gender and Reading*, Jacobus and Schor add the language of psychoanalysis, and thereby steer the discussion in a productive direction:

> From the psychoanalytic perspective, the subject or reader is constituted in and by language; the self comes into being through the position it occupies in a particular discursive exchange. Thus, psychoanalysis emphasizes not the common ground of women's experience, but the symbolic construction of woman. For Jacobus and Schor, there is no unambiguous women's experience or gendered identity to begin with.... If the reader is constituted *through* language and sexuality (and *in* division, as Lacan says) then what matters is not the identification of gender difference (as we see in *Gender and Reading*) but their *production*, a process Jacobus describes as textual. How gender differences in reading are produced, represented, and sustained provide the focus of Jacobus's and Schor's books.[56]

Caughie says that "Reading as a woman for Jacobus, as for Culler, involves constructing a gender identity in relation to the text, not finding oneself through identification with the author," and that "for Jacobus, the point of reading as a woman is not to define or fix the reader's gender identity, but to displace the fixity of gender identity."[57] Jacobus' argument is that the task of women's reading should be "the undoing of ideas about women and the meaning elaborated in male discourse."[58] She makes an important distinction between describing or prescribing a feminine linguistic practice and recognizing what it can do for us: "Uncertainties, inconsistencies, and implausibilities are not the traits of a feminine linguistic practice, but rather the functions of a practice that undoes the rules of the dominant discourse."[59] She says that "The project for a psychoanalytic feminist reading is not to trace the themes of oppression but the functioning of women's suppression in phallocentric discourse."[60]

This is also the task described in Naomi Schor's two books, as Caughie reads them:

> Schor emphasizes that how we read is bound up with what we read, but for Schor, 'to know what it means to read as a woman, one must also know what it means to read [woman],' that is, to read not just women's writing, but women's representation in writing, both the ways in which women are figured in realist novels and the ways in which such figuring gives representation its force by repressing female desire.[61]

She says that "*Breaking the Chain*, in its move from structuralism to poststructuralism, demonstrates how a female theory rather than women's experience can provide a basis for a study of gender and reading," and that "in its attention to the detail, deconstruction in particular has helped to bring about the valorization of women's reading and writing."[62] Schor combines a deconstructive focus on the detail with a feminist focus on women in order to subvert two paradigms: the paradigm of sexual difference (male/female) and the paradigm of significance (essential/accessory):

> Schor's project in the first part of *Breaking the Chain*, "Reading (For) the Feminine," is to subvert these two paradigms of difference by paying attention to those details elided by male readings... [She] makes a strong case for attention to textuality over attention to the woman reader's identity or women's ways of reading; for it is through such textual strategies and structures that women have been figured and naturalized.[63]

Schor shows how the assumption that women readers attend to the concrete and the particular while men readers prefer the general and the abstract works to exclude women not only from nonrepresentational art forms but also from theory itself.

Caughie says that Barbara Johnson's *A World of Difference* shows how political issues can be structured like, and by, the contours of figurative language. She shows the connection between the figure of the muse and violence. "The point of Johnson's analysis is not to eliminate the woman reader but to show that the study of tropes or a focus on textuality is essential for women readers."[64] In *Deconstruction, Feminism, and Pedagogy*, Johnson explores the tension between the deconstructive project of undoing the subject's position and the feminist project of restoring the personal voice. She concludes that these two are not necessarily antithetical, but that we do have to pay attention to the blind spots in the position we assume. "Deconstruction may be in danger of overvaluing self-resistance, feminist discourse may be in danger of losing self-resistance as a source of insight and power rather than merely of powerlessness."[65]

Johnson says that a strong reading is one in which the reader assumes the impossible but necessary task of setting herself up to be surprised. "To consider the reader as a woman, then, is to do more than to discriminate between two reading practices (male and female) or to reveal the blind spots in male reading; it is to change the very nature of

what we know and the nature of the questions we ask as critics and teachers of literature."[66] Caughie sums up her reading of all of the authors she mentions by pointing to what I believe to be one of the foundational assumptions of my study:

> Whether they consider the woman as reader, the woman as read, or the reader as woman, all these writers agree that the hypothesis of a female reader is, in Jacobus's words, 'strategically and politically important in classroom, curriculum, or interpretive community.'[67]

Marshall Alcorn, Jr. and Mark Bracher go a step further than classic Freudian-based psychoanalytic theorists such as Norman Holland in talking about the relationship between the formation of the self and reading.[68] They begin by outlining the traditional position, which they accept as far as it goes:

> Most of the psychological insight brought to bear on reader-response has emphasized the pleasing, rather than the educative, formative effect of literature. This critical bias is particularly true of our own time, in which the psychoanalytic approach to reader-response has generally seen literature as providing a cathartic experience, allowing the reader the gratification of engaging in primal fantasies by disguising these fantasies from the ego and the superego. For this view, represented most prominently by Freud and developed more recently, in great detail, by Norman Holland, the primary benefit of reading literature is the pleasure of indulging in infantile fantasies. Freud does recognize that literature could help increase self-awareness;... Nevertheless, Freud sees literature as less effective in bringing suppressed impulses to consciousness than in surreptitiously and unconsciously indulging such impulses.[69]

Alcorn and Bracher first look at Norman Holland's work, which, in their view, does not extend or challenge Freud's position. They argue that, in Holland's view:

> A work of literature does not pressure the reader to change—it simply provides materials that may be adapted to the reader's own identity theme, which is composed of particular defenses and fantasies. Each reader thus forms the work to fit his or her unique wishes and defenses, editing what can be made to fit and discarding what cannot.[70]

They then cite the work of another school of psychoanalytic thought which suggests the possibility that literature not only serves the above-stated function, but that it also offers "an opportunity for the formation and the re-formation of the self."[71] The task that Alcorn and Bracher set for themselves is to show that these two apparently oppositional views are actually complementary. They argue that "What is needed is a theory of reading that will reconcile the central insights of both perspectives, explaining how reading might evoke formulation as well as fulfillment of wishes—and thus variation as well as repetition of identity."[72]

The authors apparently accept a modified modernist definition of a stable, core self—what they call a "primary identity"—which is a function of the Real and is imprinted in infancy. They believe that this primary or essential self is fixed, but that it is capable of "infinite variation," and is always in a state of flux. According to object relations theory on which they base their definition of the self, various introjects (people or objects from the external world which are internalized) are experienced as elements of the self. However, they point out that these various introjects are not necessarily immutable. They can be altered, and "insofar as an introject is altered, the self is re-formed to some degree—that is, one's identity undergoes a variation."[73] Significant alterations to these introjects, they argue, can cause a change in how we imagine and experience ourselves in the world, and a number of forces can precipitate such a change: "traumatic experience, relations with other people, psychoanalysis, and—evidence suggests—the reading and interpretation of literature."[74] In their view, literature offers much more than simply an opportunity for identity to replicate itself, as Holland maintains. What Holland has missed, they assert, is that identification is not always projective identification, by which the reader projects his or her fantasies and defenses on a text but does not introject or internalize alien characteristics encountered in the text. More importantly, in their view, "projective identification itself is never merely projective; it also involves an introjective moment."[75]

These authors make a convincing case for their argument that "literature can have an important and profound positive effect as well, functioning as a kind of bountiful, nourishing matrix for a healthy developing psyche."[76] I believe that this certainly may be the case, but an equally important implication of their article, in my view, arises from the

obverse of this optimistic scenario. Their conclusion takes me back to Schweickart's discussion of the role of reading as described by Wayne Booth. It underscores her point that if the images and psychic constructs that a reader introjects are positive and affirming, then the reading experience will have a happy ending, while for many readers, depending on existing introjected elements of their identity and the relation of these elements to those encountered in the text, it will not function as a "bountiful, nourishing matrix for a healthy, developing psyche," and will not have a happy ending. Their article clarifies the psychological dynamics of resistance to or complicity with a text, and helps to explain how/why a reader takes up a particular reading position with respect to a text.

Lacan's Three Registers: The Real, the Imaginary, the Symbolic

In the following chapters, I will examine students' responses to five of the texts that I introduced, in an effort to illustrate some strategies (both reading strategies and teaching strategies) that may increase the likelihood that a positive shift or reorganization of the students' psychic constructs of the kind that Alcorn and Bracher discuss will occur when students meet and work with the texts we ask them to read. It is my contention that adolescents inevitably bring preoccupations and difficulties around sex/gender, sexuation, and sexuality to bear on any new text we ask them to read. Responses of these students to the texts I introduced lends strong support for this contention. It seems to me that the students I worked with were eager for the opportunity to articulate the pleasure, discomfort, and/or resistance that a text evokes. It is my hypothesis that with some gentle encouragement/prodding, students could develop some new strategies for reading their own responses and learning from them.

It quickly became clear to me that there is much more going on in students' responses to these texts than standard assessment measures take into account or reward. One of the ways that psychoanalytic theories have assisted my thinking about the nature and the purpose of these responses is through Lacan's formulation of the three psychic registers, which he terms the *Real*, the *Imaginary*, and the *Symbolic* orders. Because these concepts have been instrumental in shaping my thinking about the struggles that appear to be going in these responses, it seems essential to briefly describe the three registers here before I begin my analysis of students' responses in the following chapters.

Lacan uses the term the *Real* to refer to the excess that preexists and cannot be encompassed in the imaginary and symbolic orders. It is a subsymbolic order, founded out of the infant's original sense of completion and unity. It is an undifferentiated amalgam of feelings and impressions that cannot be symbolized in images or words, which is ruptured when the symbolic and imaginary orders intervene with their insistence on difference, lack, and absence.

The *Imaginary* order is the realm of images and illusion, a product of what Lacan calls the "mirror stage," at which time the infant learns to recognize itself with reference to its image in a mirror. This image, and the infant's ego, are consequently illusory and always split. The imaginary order embodies a sense of absence, lack, and alienation because the infant perceives itself only indirectly. Her/his perception and recognition of a "self" is necessarily a misperception and a misrecognition because the image the infant sees in a mirror and which s/he must identify with in order to construct a sense of self is not the "self" at all.

The third order, the *Symbolic* order, is the realm of language. It is the psychic register that is formed out of, and subject to, the interplay of presence and absence, the structures, dictates, and prohibitions of language, the Oedipal passage, the larger social order, the "law of the father," and the "big other." The Symbolic order intrudes on and forever alters the infant's perception of, and relation to, the world. The subsymbolic order of the Real, into which the infant is born and in which there is nothing other than kinesthetic experience and affect, becomes a tripartite structure.

The three orders are interdependent and all three are inextricably involved in a human being's perception and experience of the world beyond the moment when the Real and the Symbolic orders are constituted, barring the presence of psychosis or other genetic or environmental factors which inhibit the infant's usual course of development. The conflict between these three registers must reconcile, more or less comfortably or uneasily, the very different kinds of information provided by the three registers. Mark Bracher's work on the implications of psychoanalytic theories for education, and for the composition classroom more particularly, details the ways in which conflicts and resistances in one register manifest themselves in another.[77] It seems clear to me that the students I worked with exhibit conflicts in their responses to the texts I introduced which

are very similar to those that Bracher discusses. In the following chapters, I will explore how students read and understand sex/gender in an unfamiliar text with reference to the strategies that their responses show for managing this uneasy and always provisional reconciliation.

Notes: Chapter Three

1 Nancy Mellin McCracken and Bruce C. Appleby, 1992, p. 2-3.

2 Ruth Roach Pierson, 1987, p. 203.

3 *ibid*, p. 203-4.

4 Janet Miller, 1993, p. 46.

5 *ibid*, pp. 46-7.

6 *ibid*, p. 47.

7 *ibid*, p. 50.

8 *ibid*, p. 58.

9 Eloise Scott and Heather McCollum, "Gender in Classroom and School Policy," 1993.

10 Valerie Walkerdine, "Femininity as Performance," 1994.

11 *Ibid*, pp. 179-80.

12 Michael Allen "Adventures with Robin Hood," 1995

13 *ibid*, p. 169.

14 *ibid*, pp. 171-2.

15 *ibid*, p. 172.

16 *ibid*, pp. 173-4.

17 *ibid*, p. 174.

18 *ibid*, p. 174-5.

19 *ibid*, p. 190 (Emphasis in original).

20 *ibid*.

21 Jean Baker Miller *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, 1976, p. 34.

22 Appleby, Bruce C. "Psychological and Sociolinguistic Bases for Gender-Sensitive Teaching," 1992.

23 *ibid*, pp. 16-17.

24 *ibid*, p. 21.

25 Bowman, Cynthia Ann. "Gender Differences in Response to Literature." 1992.

26 Bowman, 1992, p. 87.

27 *ibid*, p. 88.

28 *ibid*, p. 92.

29 Meredith Rogers Cherland, *Private Practices: Girls Reading Fiction and Constructing Identity*, 1994.

[30] *ibid*, p. 21.

[31] See Judith Fetterley (1978, 1986) and Patrocinio Schweickart (1989).

[32] Laura Apol Obbink "Feminist Theory in the Classroom: Choices, Questions, Voices," 1992, p. 38.

[33] Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978)

[34] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970.

[35] Judith Fetterley *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, 1978, p. ix.

[36] Judith Fetterley "Reading About Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'the Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'the Yellow Wallpaper,'" 1986, pp. 147-8.

[37] Nancy R. Comley, "Father Knows Best: Reading around 'Indian Camp,'" 1992.

[38] *ibid*, p. 77.

[39] *ibid*, p. 79.

[40] Patrocinio P. Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," 1989.

[41] *ibid*, p. 21.

[42] *ibid*, p. 24.

[43] *ibid*, p. 26.

[44] *ibid*, p. 27.

[45] *ibid*, p. 28.

[46] *ibid*, p. 33.

[47] Culler, Jonathan. "Reading as a Woman," 1982, p. 49.

[48] *ibid*

[49] *ibid, p. 64.*

[50] *ibid, p. 55.*

[51] *ibid, pp. 60-61.*

[52] Pamela L. Caughie, "Women Reading/Reading Women: A Review of Some Recent Books on Gender and Reading," 1988, pp. 318-19.

[53] *ibid*, p. 319.

[54] *ibid*, p. 320.

[55] *ibid*, p. 325.

[56] *ibid.*

[57] *ibid*, p. 326.

[58] *ibid*, p. 327.

[59] *ibid.*

[60] *ibid*, p. 328.

[61] *ibid.*

[62] *ibid*, p. 329.

[63] *ibid*, p. 329-30.

[64] *ibid*, p. 332.

[65] Barbara Johnson, cited in Caughie, p. 333.

[66] *ibid*, p. 334.

[67] *ibid*, p. 335.

[68] Marshall W. Alcorn and Mark Bracher, 1985.

[69] *ibid*, p. 342.

[70] *ibid*.

[71] *ibid*, p. 343.

[72] *ibid*.

[73] *ibid*, p. 344.

[74] *ibid*.

[75] *ibid*, p. 351.

[76] *ibid*, p. 352.

[77] Mark Bracher, *The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education*, 1999, pp. 25-67.

Chapter Four: "The Little Prince"

My Approach to the Text

Twenty of the twenty-seven students who consented to participate in my study were present when I introduced "The Little Prince" and all of these wrote and submitted responses. As outlined in my previous discussion of methodology, I introduced the selection very briefly, stating that I had a story that I would like them to read, and that I hoped they would share their first reactions with me. I explained that their responses might include comments or questions about the story and/or a description of the feelings it evoked for them—for example, they could tell me whether they liked or disliked it, if there was something in it that they agreed or disagreed with, or if it made them think of something else. I gave students a copy of the story and read it to them. I then passed out a second copy which was broken into segments of several sentences which were interspersed with a generous quantity of white space in which to record their impressions. I read each section to them and paused after each to allow them to write, waiting until they appeared to be ready to move on.

I had some initial reservations about choosing this story because I was afraid that students might receive it as a silly children's story or a simplistic fairy-tale and conclude that it was not worth serious consideration. This did not prove to be the case, however. I was gratified and surprised to notice that every student, without exception, worked industriously and wrote at length each time we paused. Several times during that eighty minute lesson Kim and I exchanged puzzled and delighted glances at each other over their heads, which were bent, silently and assiduously, to their writing. They appeared to be eager to describe how they fleshed out the story's skeletal structure to create their own fully-imagined narrative. In the sections that follow, I will first examine some of the common threads that connect the students' readings to one another and to some basic psychoanalytic concepts. I will then focus on the specific strategies and preconceptions about sex/gender that individual students call on to construct their individual interpretations.

Because student's sex/gender is significant in many ways and because many of these students seemed to deliberately choose pseudonyms for their potential to play with,

reinforce, and/or resist prevailing norms about boys' and girls' names, I feel that it is important to indicate the sex/gender of each participant along with their comments. For example, girls chose names such as "Alyssa" (always followed by a carefully drawn red heart) and "Sunflower," but they also adopted the pseudonyms "Mustang" and "Ozzie." Boys chose names that ran the gamut from fairly neutral masculine names such as "Tommy" and "Doc" to some that seemed self-consciously hyper-masculine, such as "Ninja" and "Viper." No male chose a name that could be construed as "unisex" or feminine except Marylin Manson, who shares the name with a gender-bending, heavy metal, shock-rock group. I have indicated whether the student is male or female by placing (f) or (m) immediately after each pseudonym in the discussions of students' responses to "The Little Prince" as well as in my discussions of their responses to the other four texts that I examine in the chapters following this one.

I have chosen to use a bold font for student pseudonyms each time that I introduce a new name in that portion of my text. I worked with a fairly large group of students and I am aware that some readers may find the introduction of a series of names to be confusing or offputting. At the same time, I feel that it is important to preserve some sense of the students' personalities and their originality, which would be lost if I discussed responses in more general or anonymous terms. I do not believe that it will be crucial for a reader to concentrate on remembering what individual students say, but I do hope that over the course of my discussion of students' responses to five texts, the reader will begin to recognize some of the strong individual voices that have emerged for me.

In all cases, I have reproduced students' responses as closely as possible to their handwritten originals. Because it would be unnecessarily intrusive, I have chosen not to indicate each time that I have transcribed an unconventional spelling, punctuation, or usage as it appears in the original, but I will place any additions, deletions, comments, or changes from the original that I have made in parentheses.

My Reading

"The Little Prince" is a very short (290 words) and provokingly spare little tale by Suniti Namjoshi which begins much like a classic fairy tale, but with a subtle twist: [1] Although the stepmother becomes queen when she marries a king, she has an "extraordinary ambition" for her daughter. She wants her daughter to rule the kingdom in

her own right. She flouts tradition, consciously subverting the usual process of socialization by tutoring the princess for a future "possible" role as sovereign, while teaching the prince to be "demure and shy, docile and gentle." She persuades the king to set aside conventional rules of succession, and instead "let the more capable rule the kingdom." They agree to a series of tests in "hunting, tennis, mathematics, and the law" which the princess wins handily, to the prince's (presumed) shame and his father's discredit. The king reluctantly names the princess as his successor, but the citizens, who have more sense than either the king or queen, rise up "as one man" to declare "We will not be ruled by a woman." They depose the princess, "haul out" the Prince, and "set him on the throne" in her place. The story concludes with what might be construed as a conventional "happily ever after" ending, but with a sardonic edge that provokes a reader to look beyond a literal interpretation: "The wicked queen and her unlucky daughter were exiled forever. And thus, order was restored, and justice done."

In my view, the story is a witty and superbly crafted gem. Namjoshi gives us a stripped-down narrative with no moralizing or editorial commentary, but I find it impossible to read it without hearing another story, a much longer and more passionate one, speaking to me from between the lines that Namjoshi has written. The tale is, on one level, a ringing endorsement of patriarchal bias, but it is also a humorous and ironic indictment of the same power structures. The story plays on and with the reader's familiarity with old standards such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. It invites us to bring to it our preconceptions about the plot and the stock fairy-tale characters, until we realize that these preconceptions don't work. At this point, we almost certainly have to stop long enough to assess the problems that the text creates and to adjust our reading strategies. In my view, the richness and the pedagogical possibilities of a text such as "The Little Prince" arise during these moments of confusion, indecision, and paradox.

Connecting Threads

"The writer says wicked"

Several overarching themes emerged for me in reading students' responses to "The Little Prince" which connect them to one another and to some basic psychoanalytic concepts. One aspect of the text that many students noticed and commented on is its

description of the queen as the "wicked stepmother." Of the twenty responses, fifteen remark on the choice of the phrase, expressing surprise, curiosity, agreement, dissent, or concern with the word "wicked" and the associations that it evokes. Three of the remaining five mention the word but do so in what appears to be a matter-of-fact way and don't seem particularly curious about or troubled by it. Only two of the twenty responses make no mention of the word. It seems to elicit a reaction based on a student's evaluation of the queen's plan to defy traditional sex/gender norms and whether/how much she loved the children—in particular, her own daughter.

Nine responses (6 f, 3 m) pose some variation of the question that **Mustang (f)** asks: "Why would they describe the stepmother as wicked?" Students in this group express a matter-of-fact curiosity about the author's reasons for describing the queen this way, but do not offer an interpretation or opinion. **Theresa's (f)** version of this question is especially interesting. It doesn't ask why the author chose that word, or if the queen is in fact wicked. It wonders instead "Why does the stepmother *have to* be wicked? [emphasis added]" suggesting that the author is not simply choosing a word that describes the objective reality of the queen's nature. Rather, the adjective itself, once attached to her, seems to possess a magical power which determines the queen's nature. She is *compelled* to be wicked by something or somebody—narrative convention, the author's ideology and intention, or something within the story itself that determines her psychology and/or her behavior—although the origin of the injunction remains a mystery.

Six responses (3 f, 3m) repeat the question, but with an embedded answer, reaction, or evaluation. **Tina-Jo (f)** defends the queen, rejecting what she feels is an unfair judgment: "How come the stepmother is wicked? All she is doing is helping her son and daughter grow up to be their own individuals." **Adrian's (f)** reading is similarly assertive and demonstrates an active approach to reading that seems something like a dance with the author—she assumes that she can lead when she wants to, and firmly insists on her right to disagree with what she reads as the author's opinion:

> *The writer says wicked. She married a king who had a son then a daughter. There isn't anything wicked about her from my point of view.*

In the same way, **Doc's (m)** response expresses resistance to being manipulated by the author and told how to feel about the queen. He builds an argument to support what

appears to be an instinctual rejection of the text's assessment of the queen, and paints a revisionist portrait of a mother who defends the interests of her own flesh and blood:

> *You know the queen is stereotyped as a evil person. I didn't like this because it doesn't give you a chance to judge her. As soon as you see the word wicked you think well she must be evil, or cold hearted, it's like the character is in a set role. I don't think it right to call the queen "wicked" because she is looking out for her daughter. The prince is not a part of her. She does not care about the prince."*

In this reading, the queen and the prince appear to be two distinct individuals, while the boundary which differentiates the queen from her daughter is much less distinct.

Three responses appear to accept "wicked" as information about the queen that they must or should use to construct a reading. For students such as **Jaraf (m)**, the challenge is to understand why the author uses the word rather than to argue with her. He makes an intriguing connection when he introduces the word "snob" to help him understand why both the queen and the princess are wicked: "I get the impression that the daughter and the mother are both snobs because of the word wicked." **Marylin Manson (m)** explains the queen's wickedness with reference to her ambition:

> *Why is the stepmother wicked? I feel she is because she wants her daughter to take over the kingdom.*

Sunflower's (f) response puts still another spin on the word wicked, asking "Why would the king want to trash his reputation?" In this response, the word wicked seems to carry moral and sexual associations, rather than the more usual fairy-tale connotations of mean and cruel. When the king "trashes his reputation" by marrying trash—a tramp, a cheap, disreputable or loose woman—his image is irredeemably tarnished.

"She had no right to favor one child"

The image of parents engaged in a struggle over their children's futures evoked strong emotions and highly personal associations. With few exceptions, students offered swift and emphatic judgments of the two adults which appear to be based almost entirely on how they treat their children. Responses reveal interest, approval, confusion, concern, irritation, anger, disappointment, resentment and/or anxiety, sometimes simultaneously.

Mustang's (f) response, for example, expresses puzzlement about the queen's motivation for choosing to secure her daughter's future at the prince's expense:

> *Why would they be raised differently? I don't think its right to raise the children differently because it is saying you love one more than the other, in this piece the stepmother would rather see the daughter live a better life than the son. They should be equal.*

This reading does not view the queen's actions as a mother's instinctive desire to build a good future for her offspring or as a zealous attempt to compensate for institutionalized inequities. Instead, they are taken to be a direct measure of how much she loves each child. This reading is one which apparently does not assign as much weight to the difference between a mother and a stepmother as many others did. Since a good mother is always scrupulously fair, especially with respect to love, the queen's preferential treatment of her daughter elicits from Mustang not just disagreement, but something that sounds to me more like indignation. This reading foregrounds an appeal for justice on the prince's behalf, but in doing so, it causes the injustice in the obverse scenario—the traditional one in which the prince is groomed to assume sovereignty of the kingdom while the princess is taught to be demure, shy, docile and gentle—to become blurred or entirely recede from view. Mustang's insistence that the children should be loved equally would seem to require the queen's collusion with traditional sex/gender inequalities, but it allows the reader to avoid the discomfort of recognizing that both options are unfair.

Many responses seem to have their origins in the image of the archetypal phallic mother, an image which psychoanalytic theories posit is created as a result of the infant's inability to reconcile two powerful and conflicting/conflicted impressions of the seemingly omnipotent caregiver/mother.[2] To an infant whose perceptual and cognitive systems are as yet undeveloped, the mother or primary caregiver is experienced in two very different ways. In one instance, she (the primary caregiver is most often female) is experienced as all-good and all-loving—a warm, soft, responsive presence who provides unbounded nourishment, satisfaction, relief, and comfort. At other times, the infant perceives her as monstrously and absolutely bad—cold, harsh, and unresponsive, as when the infant is uncomfortable, wet, or hungry and the mother delays or denies gratification of a need to be held, changed, or fed. Because the immature mind cannot reconcile these

two impressions, the newborn splits the mother-figure into two, one of whom is entirely good and one entirely bad. The filters of immaturity and absolute dependency which give rise to this perception, or hallucination, of the mother as a larger than life figure with a terrible power may be modified by later learning and experience, but they nevertheless remain as constitutive organizers of perception. This fantasy plays a significant role in students' responses to "The Little Prince," as well as to "The Griesly Wife" and Medea the Sorceress," which I will examine more closely in later chapters.

In responses such as **Alyssa's (f)**, for example, the mother appears to possess an unbounded power, both for good and ill. She creates her children and molds them into the shape that she desires. Much of this power appears to be concentrated in the socio-cultural role, rather than in a biological connection, since the queen successfully instills the traits she wants in both the prince and princess. However, Alyssa's response does carefully distinguish between "*her* daughter" and "*the* prince":

> *Why did the stepmother tutor only her daughter to rule the kingdom? For years, from what I read the prince/king has always ruled the kingdom. Why does she want to change it? I don't think it's fair because she made her daughter powerful in her own way and made the prince shy and other stuff so he couldn't even have a chance to try to be a prince that could rule the kingdom.*

Alyssa's remarks grant that the queen abuses and cheats both children by making this choice for them, but she clearly empathizes with the prince. He is entitled to a "normal" upbringing which would bestow certain (masculine) attributes, privileges, and opportunities on him. The queen's attempts to flout tradition and strip him of his manhood are evil and unnatural, as is the princess whom the queen shapes into a mirror image of her monstrous self.

Ninja's (m) reading is one of several which foreground the males and male subjectivity, while the queen and her daughter appear as shadowy figures in the background. It is firmly grounded in two beliefs: 1) that there are appropriate behaviors specific to males and females and 2) that power is distributed unequally (but properly) on the basis of gender.

What I got from this is that so even if the prince rules he will be like a girl anyway. It will also ruin his chance of becoming ruler once the king sees him that way. Possible kingdom suggesting that there is still a fairly good chance she won't be ruler anyway.

Even though the queen's plan succeeds and the princess becomes ruler until the people depose her, Ninja's response assigns the power to make a final determination about who will rule to the king. The king will not allow the prince to become ruler once he sees him "that way," and even if he does allow it, the prince will behave like a girl and will therefore not be taken seriously as a monarch. Ninja holds out the hope that the situation won't deteriorate to such an unfortunate extent that the princess becomes ruler.

Jaraf's (m) response builds on many of these same preconceptions to construct his reading and his images of the queen and the princess and adds a dimension of deliberate aggression. While the reign of a male ruler seems to be an unremarkable condition, the queen's efforts to guarantee her daughter's succession are linked to images of strife, violence, and disorder rather than images of a responsible exercise of authority.

When they use the word reign I picture the stepmother being an evil woman and that reign means that she wants her daughter to wrath upon the town, and do no good instead of good.

Jaraf is puzzled by the word reign, which appears to belong in a phrase such as "reign of terror." It seems that for him, to reign is not a neutral or a benevolent act but an evil and destructive one. In the story that Jaraf constructs, the females are bad—that is, not sweet, limpid, attractive, or nice. Rather, they wield great power and cause widespread and deliberate harm. Jaraf immediately envisions the narrative in terms of a struggle between good and evil:

I think that the queen is setting up for an evil plan as long as her daughter gets the kingdom. I think she's also jealous of men always being the kings and forever.

In Jaraf's reading, the scheming, evil queen seems closely related to Sleeping Beauty's wicked stepmother, except that in this version, the princess is the means to power for the queen and the men are obstacles in her path.

Curtis's (m) response asks "Why does the woman always have to have it her way?" The structure of his question presents the female desire for domination as an ongoing, unvarying and ubiquitous condition. The queen becomes *the woman*, a generic representative of the archetypal castrating female who must *always* have *it* (sex, power, the phallus, the male penis?) on her own terms:

> *How does the king [k]now that his son would do better than his daughter? He doesn't know what the woman was teaching his son. Of course the princess won she was taught how to do the tests the son was just taught to be shy.*

Viper's (m) response, even more explicitly than Curtis's, invests the queen with malevolent motives, unbounded ambition, a narcissistic personality, a psychopathic lack of scruples, and an absolute power to shape her children's future:

> *The stepmother is wicked because she taught her son what he's not supposed to be taught so that he can't be ruler but she favored her daughter. It's like she'll do anything to arrive at her ambition. even favor one child more than the other.*

Similarly, **Mercedes' (f)** response portrays the queen as a narcissistic mother who has a pathological inability to distinguish her daughter's identity, achievements, and future from her own. Mercedes appears to empathize with the prince, whom the queen rejects, but she then makes an interesting leap from patriarchal rule to the need for safety and self-defense, which suggests that male power necessarily involves the threat of abuse:

> *In some ways she is selfish because she only wants good things to happen to her daughter and not to her stepson. ... The wicked stepmother planned from the beginning to make her daughter more like a man and his son more like a girl so he wouldn't be the ruler of the kingdom. She raised her daughter that way so she could defend herself.*

In this view, the queen is not motivated by a lust for power but by fear and a desire to teach her daughter to protect herself. Informing this response is an assumption that there are important traits which are linked, normally and naturally but not unalterably, with sex/gender. Possessing male qualities—being *like* a man—is essential to becoming a ruler, while possessing female attributes—being *like* a woman—is fatal to such an

ambition. The ruler's biological sex is not as important as the possession of necessary masculine traits.

"Blood's thicker than water, and why should she care about the prince?"

One argument which the text provokes, and which various responses approach from diametrically opposed positions, centers around the respective importance of biology and sociology in parenting. **Honda's (f)** response, "The wicked mother wants her daughter to rule the kingdom by herself, because she didn't give birth to the son herself," is one that underscores the biological connection between a mother and her child. **Tina-Jo (f)** seems to share Honda's understanding that this relationship between mother and child supersedes custom and the social order, but she sees the queen's attempt to subvert "usual" gender roles as a gross injustice to the prince:

> *Why would the queen change roles of the kids? Usually the prince is taught sovereignty of his possible kingdom and the princess is supposed to be demure and shy, docile and gentle. I think she taught the princess to be like that because she was her blood child and the prince was not. She wanted her daughter to be over the kings son.*

Within this genetically-determined frame of reference, it is understandable that a mother would go to such extraordinary lengths for her "blood child," but she is nevertheless wrong to do so.

Doc's (m) response, on the other hand, accepts that a mother's instinctual ties to her natural child will override social conventions and obligations, but nstead of castigating the queen for such favoritism, it empathizes with her and defends her at some length:

> *These sentences talked about how the queen was doing what is best for her daughter. She was trying to give her an advantage over the prince. I would do the same thing. Blood's thicker than water, and why should she care about the prince he is related by name alone.... Again the queen is trying to do what best for her daughter. She begged the king because she had no power in this case. I think the queen's a good mother and she is paving the way for her daughter to be successful. The queen used all her power* to help her daughter. *[So that I won't miss the emphasis, the last four words are larger, and in print rather than script.]... The father wasn't their at all and why should the queen*

care about the stepson, when she had her own daughter. I think it's wrong to condemn the Mom. She did what was right for her daughter.

Doc's response refuses identification with the king or prince on the basis of gender, and instead identifies with a mother whose instinctive and appropriate concern is for the welfare of her natural child. It suggests a symbiotic unity whereby the bodies and the desires of a mother and her child are fused on an unconscious level. This biological bond takes precedence over obligations which are based on arbitrary social arrangements or abstract ideals of marriage and family. In this view, a label such as "wicked" seems to bear little relevance to the queen's behavior. Doc attends selectively to the queen's request that the king should remember that he has two children and allow the more capable to rule, reading it not as a plea for justice but as a case of special pleading on her daughter's behalf. He implicitly recognizes and questions existing inequities which justify the queen's use of the power she does have to protect and advance her daughter in a world which is not set up to give her an even break.

Unlike Doc's response, **Curtis's (m)** doesn't stem from a gut-level conviction that "blood is thicker than water." The overriding bond between a mother and her natural child that lies at the heart of Doc's reading is apparently incomprehensible to Curtis:

Why should the queen only want her daughter to run the kingdom? Why was it so important for the daughter to be the only ruler of the kingdom? Why can't both rule the kingdom?... Did the woman bring up both children? What did the woman teach her daughter to be sovereignty of the kingdom, while the prince was taught to be shy and gentle? Why would the woman be teaching the prince? Why would the [queen?] teach the children different things?

Curtis's reading struggles with the "facts," or the literal content, of the story. He seems confused and unfamiliar with customs and laws that govern royal succession and fills this gap in his knowledge by blending a contemporary, North American, democratic view of politics and gender relations with his imaginings about a monarchy. In so doing, he arrives at what he sees as a perfectly reasonable solution to the central problems which the story posed for most readers: Are traditional laws of succession just? Is our first obligation to personal relationships or to the larger social order? He wonders whether the woman educated both children, implying that it would be odd indeed if the queen did

tutor the prince. The structure of the sentence that interrogates the queen's role in her children's education reveals a great deal about how Curtis envisions the relationship between the queen and the two children. It adopts the active form of the verb "teach" to ask why the woman teaches her daughter what she does, and talks about "her daughter" rather than the more formal and distancing "the princess." The following clause switches to the passive voice to talk about the prince and doesn't specify by whom the prince "was taught." The notion of educating boys and girls differently to prepare them for different roles is not a common-sense fact but becomes a real question. In Curtis's view, the queen does have the private power to upset the existing system of sex/gender roles, which are not biologically ordained but learned at the mother's knee. However, the king has the public, institutionally sanctioned power to decide the final outcome.

"Are kings suppose to be there for their children?"

Although the king rules the kingdom and the majority of students' responses invest him with a great deal of symbolic and institutional power, most do not imbue him with the kind of emotional significance that the figure of the queen evokes. Many readers express irritation, annoyance, or indignation at what they judge to be the king's shortcomings as a father. He is busy, distracted, and in many cases somewhat vague, but few saw him as malevolent or even especially powerful. **Mustang's (f)** reading questions the legitimacy of male values and male measures of achievement, challenges the assumption that becoming ruler is the most desirable goal for the princess, and asks whether the queen did, in fact, want the throne for her daughter:

> *It sounds like being a king is more important than his family.... It is saying he (the king) was to busy to do anything eles except take care of the kingdom, is that what the stepmother wanted for her daughter?... Why would the king be mad if his daughter won, I would think he would be happy. Why do fathers want their sons to follow their footsteps.*

Mustang's response implicitly condemns the king's choice of priorities and his neglect of his family. It expresses confusion and sorrow about what Mustang apparently sees as a fact in this story but also as a generic and continuing truth—that fathers desire and encourage public recognition for their sons but not for their daughters.

Raine's (f) comments do not assume that the prince would win despite his early training. Instead, they express what seems to be puzzlement and anger around the king's masculinist thinking, his obtuseness, and his misconceived, misplaced emotions toward both children:

> *Why would it teach the queen a lesson? Would the king just chose the prince no matter what? Why would the king be mad at his son. He should be proud of his daughter! She tried! It is better for the kingdom this way.*

She sees no reason for him to be angry with his son, and every reason to be pleased with his daughter's accomplishment, which seems to have more to do with perseverance and enthusiasm than with winning—"she tried!"

Cosmo (m) seems to find it puzzling, upsetting, and more than a little irksome to imagine a father that would neglect his children, as he sees the king doing, for any reason other than the most dire of emergencies. It seems that Cosmo would appreciate a mathematical equation that would help him decide whether the king is, in fact, a delinquent father:

> *What kind of things could be more important than his own children? War I could understand, but anything else I don't think so. How many times did he see them in a year?*

Several students share this image of time as a commodity that the king should parcel out evenly, and a number agree that the king should have been around to see what the queen was doing, and that if he had been, he would have put a stop to it.

Honda's (f) response also sees the king as too busy to be a good father, but in her reading, his neglect is more basic than simply not devoting time to his family:

> *The king was always busy and doesn't (pay attention and) ^ spend much time with his wife and kids. He only care about things that happen to the kingdom. The king likes to take care of things by himself.*

By carefully inserting the verb phrase "pay attention" before she mentions spending time, it seems that Honda intends to rectify an important omission. The king *only cares about things* as they relate to his kingdom, and he *likes to take care of* these *things* by himself—presumably, more than he cares about, or likes to take care of, his family. Although the

prince and princess are presumably both the king's natural children, in Honda's reading, the father-son bond seems to be much stronger than the father-daughter bond:

> *The king was angry because his own son had lost to a gril and he might not like his daughter as much as he like his son.*

Honda's reading doesn't romanticize or eroticize the father-daughter bond. The king's *own son* had been humiliated by losing, not to his sister or the king's daughter, but to *a girl*. He *likes* his son, a word that suggests blanket approval and acceptance, more than he likes his daughter, and narcissistically identifies with his son in the way that other responses have shown the queen to identify with her daughter. His need to enhance the image of himself that he projects onto his son might explain why he *likes*—defensively favors—his son, while prohibitions against incest and a fear of his own "feminine" weakness may encourage him to *not like*—denigrate and despise—his daughter. His anger seems to spring from the guilt and shame he feels about his son's feminine traits. The prince does not just fail a crucial test of his own manhood; his failure also casts suspicion on the king's:

> *When his son failed, or nearly failed, I believe that the king was feeling that he was a lousy father as his son did not pass the test.*

Alyssa (f) seems to share this impression. Her response asks "Why was he angry?" and immediately answers her own question: "Because of the fact his son failed or because he feels he failed." **Doc (m)** reads the sentence which says "It could do no harm, and it would teach her a lesson" as evidence that the king believed that the boy would win in spite of the queen's interference:

> *The king thought his son would win the events he picked. When his son failed he didn't want people to lose respect for him so he said he nearly failed. The king knew he was duped but as a man of his word he kept the deal.*

Alyssa's use of multiple pronouns creates ambiguity about whether the king fears that the people will lose respect for his son or for himself, which suggests that the two may be indistinguishable on an affective and unconscious level. In spite of his embarrassment at his own and/or his son's failure to measure up as a man, the king is an upright man who honors his word. He does what the rules of fair play require, rather than what would salve his pride or what would be best for his son.

Tommy's (m) response assumes that the children were not just raised differently, but were deliberately pitted against one another:

> *Why did the queen teach the children to go against each other? If the prince was taught to be "demure, shy, docile, and gentle," why didn't the prince realise that the queen wanted him out of the picture?*

His reading makes a leap from raising his son and daughter in separate and unequal spheres to actively encouraging aggression and hostility toward one another by teaching them "to go against each other." It also equates "good girl" femininity with being invisible, actively erased, or expunged—the queen "wanted him out of the picture." Tommy doesn't find this noteworthy; but what is remarkable is that the prince was blind to the queen's scheme. Tommy's response and others like it draw on some self-evident "facts" or core beliefs such as the following: it is a father's job to make his son into a man; being a man necessarily involves competition and winning; to lose, especially when one's opponent is female, is humiliating; and gender is mostly learned, not biologically determined or fixed.

Raine's (f) response draws on her knowledge that the king's behavior is normal for successful males in our society:

> *This is not unusual for a "important" father. Kids usually get neglected by these types. How come it is important in this story? It shows that the king is the "man." He supports the family & kingdom.*

Her use of the present tense indicates that this is what fathers do here and now, not in some ancient, far-removed, or mythical kingdom. Raine apparently reads the story as an allegory and has little difficulty reconciling its fairy-tale elements with its more contemporary ones. Her comments communicate a distaste for this definition of masculinity, which implies abdicating parental responsibilities, by the use of quotation marks and also by the choice of the word *types*, which strips the king of individuality and treats him as an anonymous member of a group of males who behave this way. She suggests that assigning total responsibility for family and state to males is detrimental to men and their children.

Unlike the majority of responses that echoed Raine's disapproval, **Jaraf's (m)** response paints a positive portrait of a hardworking, conscientious man:

I get the picture that the king is always busy, and careful about what he does, and when he does it.... I think that the king was angry at the princess because of her outspoken attitude. He was surprised that his daughter wasn't humble. Also, he was mad that his son lost to a little girl.

There is no suggestion that the king is neglectful or that Jaraf disapproves. Instead, his comments sympathize with a busy, powerful statesman. This reading is an example of one that is provoked by the text but which seems to (possibly willfully) select and ignore cues on the basis of prior assumptions and the resistances that the text calls up. While the princess does not actually speak at all in the text, this reading construes her victory as a speech act and evidence of an "attitude" which says too much, too brazenly:

Allison's (f) response does not share this unreservedly positive view of the king. Rather, it is representative of several that view the queen as deceitful, cunning, and dangerous while the king is merely unobservant, naive, and easily duped:

The king didn't know what they were being taught, the fact that she was teaching them the opposite roles behind his back. Why do we have to know what he's doing when he didn't see the kids.

In this reading, the queen's motives are obscure and suspect, while the king's are direct and aboveboard.

Curtis's (m) response is a male point of view that does not defend the king or make apologies for him. It asks "Why couldn't the king take out five minutes a day to see them?" Five minutes is apparently more than Curtis imagines when the text uses the word "rarely." He wants more detailed information about the king's duties, his motives, and his whereabouts:

What kind of affairs of the kingdom? Why does he have children if he doesn't have time to see them? Was the king also out of town, or just in another room? How many times a week did he see them? Couldn't he take time off the kingdom to visit with his children?

In this reading, having children is not an accidental, unintended, or inevitable result of marriage. Rather, it is a deliberate choice made by people who should have the desire and the capacity to be good parents. The questions posed here suggest that a father's role includes both physical proximity and time spent with his children. Curtis's response

seems to be an attempt to work out, with almost mathematical precision, whether the king was negligent or not, but also whether the distance that separates him from his children is physical or emotional. He does not avoid or "read through" the difficulty caused by the king's absence and preoccupation by imagining him as a stereotypical upper middle-class father who is too busy with his career to be an involved parent, and seems to have some difficulty constructing an image of the king as an absentee father.

In **Tina-Jo's (f)** response, the father's neglect of his children becomes the effect of active choices made by both parents, who are individuals with opposing desires and free will. It is not simply an omission or oversight, and not solely the king's responsibility:

> *Did the queen not allow the king to see them? Or did he choose not to see them at all. Did he want to wait and see the queen finished product of raising his kids. Did he make himself so busy that he had no time at all with the kids? Did he want nothing at all to do with them. Did he disagree with how the queen was raising them.*
>
> *Why did the queen beg and not demand? Was the king abusive* in any way?
>
> *Why does the queen have to go to the king and beg for something?*

It seems important to Tina-Jo to ask not only what choices each makes and why, but who has the power to control the nature and the dynamics of family relationships. The role of king does not require or mandate the king's non-involvement, nor is it caused by passive procrastination or inaction. Instead, it results from an active *desire* to remain uninvolved. Like Curtis's, Tina-Jo's reading seems to resist an image of parents who are not powerful, free agents. It does not assume that the balance of power in a marriage is necessarily weighted on the side of the male, but it does make an immediate, and what may seem to some readers unwarranted, mental leap from the image of a begging wife to that of an abusive husband.

"She begged the king because she had no power in this case."

Although the students' responses indicate that they were primarily interested in the king and his new wife as parents, they all used their highly individual conceptions of the dynamics of power and gender within a marriage to construct an intelligible, if confusing, narrative. **Mustang (f),** for example, has some difficulty with the story. The queen's impotent entreaty elicits comments that sound both personal and emotional:

> *Why would the wicked queen fall on her knees and beg the king, if you are married you wouldn't have to do that. To me it seems like the men have all the power if ladies had to beg if they wanted something. I strongly disagree with that.*

In Mustang's experience, men have more institutionally sanctioned power than "ladies" do, but she believes, or wants to believe, that marriage would/should reduce or eliminate this disparity. The structure of this response is equivocal about whether the marriage in this story rings false to Mustang or whether men do indeed have all the power while ladies need to beg when they want something. If the latter is true, Mustang strongly protests, then the situation is unacceptable.

Alyssa's (f) reading seems to struggle with the idea that the relationship between a king and his spouse is traditionally and inherently asymmetrical. She also seems unaware of the historical and fictional tradition by which a female will reign only when there is no direct male successor:

> *Why did she want her daughter to rule the kingdom if she was married to the king wouldn't she be a queen? If not doesn't she have some power.... Why was she so determined to make her daughter reign alone? Wouldn't it be better if the wicked stepmother ruled?*

Alyssa's reading is a female-centered one in which the king and the prince all but disappear. She questions the degree of power that the queen possesses, assuming that if she wanted it, she could claim the throne for herself.

Raine's (f) response does not appear to read an imbalance of power into the relationship between the king and queen. It asks, with what seems to me to be a blend of curiosity and disbelief colored by indignation and assertiveness, "How come the queen has to "BEG" the king for a favor. Can she not just ask?" **Tommy (m)** echoes the question: "Why would the queen have to "beg" the king for a favor? Couldn't she just demand it, or ask him properly?" The last clause, however, adds another dimension to the queen's suit—to "ask properly" for something suggests the relationship between a child and a powerful parent rather than a request made of a partner.

Mercedes' (f) response points out that it *appears* that the queen has no power in the story, but it also clearly insists on a difference between the imbalance of power as seen from the outside and the reality of the relationship on a deeper psychological level by

drawing attention to the distinction between what the relationship "looks like" and what it is.

> *It looks like she is just like hiered help to help raise his children and looked like a good opportunity to make something out of her daughter. If she were a queen, she would demand the more qualified one to be the ruler.*

In the absence of socially sanctioned power, the best the queen can do, apparently, is to barter child-care services (she helps to raise *his* children, although the princess is her natural child, and the prince is her stepson) for a better future for her daughter. She does not have the institutionally sanctioned power of a monarch, but she does have the power to manipulate him.

"How could a girl win?"

Many of the responses react, in a variety of ways, to the text's statement that "It [the queen's request for a competition to determine succession] could do no harm, and it would teach her a lesson." Some students accept the sentence as a statement of fact, both about the king's assumptions and about objective reality. **Alyssa (f)** seems surprised that the prince does not win:

> *How exactly would it teach her a lesson? Why did the prince practically fail everything. Does it have anything to do with the stepmother?*

This seems to contradict earlier portions of her response, which grant the queen the desire and the power to mold the prince in deviant ways. An equal number of male and female students state that, despite the queen's interference and the differential tutoring they received, the prince would nonetheless have defeated the princess at such masculine pursuits as hunting, math, tennis, and law.

Individual Differences

It seems quite clear that there are significant similarities in the personal and cultural knowledges, experiences, and strategies that students draw on to construct their readings of "The Little Prince." It is also apparent that there are some common sociological and psychological influences which predispose students to "see" certain readings and not others. It is undoubtedly valuable, as many feminist theorists point out, to look for clues in these responses about the social or psychic forces that create the conditions whereby

certain readings become possible and others are discouraged or disallowed. However, I find the differences which make each reading a unique product of attending to certain cues and ignoring, resisting or rejecting others to be in many ways more striking, more interesting, and more productive than cataloguing commonalities.

In the following sections, I want to illustrate some strategies for looking closely at students' readings, for helping them to look more closely at their own and each others', in an attempt to interrogate those elements that seem curious, out of place, or slightly skewed. These elements that necessarily fall outside of any shared or common reading are precisely those elements that invite closer scrutiny. All readings of "The Little Prince," for example, struggle in various ways with issues around parenting, family relationships, power, and gender equality. Although it is an interesting activity, it doesn't seem to me that highlighting and illuminating these themes, or describing students as feminist, traditional, misogynist (or any more refined gradation of these labels) should be the final aim of my interpretations of their responses. I believe that it is least as productive to focus my reading of the text, and my reading of students' responses, on the unique and surprising insights that can emerge.

Mustang's (f) response, for example, is one of many that demonstrate a keen awareness that institutionalized inequities have oppressed women while expressing a great deal of sympathy for the prince's plight. The final effect of Mustang's ambivalent comments is to complicate any simplistic feminist sympathies she may have because they reveal her awareness that the prince, in the end, is equally victimized by the citizen's demands that he be a real man and behave like a ruler. It seems clear that it would likely not take much of a nudge to convince Mustang to reassess her stance toward the text and to encourage her to move a step closer to acknowledging the built-in difficulties that accompany sex/gender:

> *In the first sentence it sounds like they forced the prince on the throne, maybe the son did not want to but just because he was a man he had no say. Why would they exile the wicked queen and her unlucky daughter thats stupid. If the daughter was more intellegent and more capable than the son she should have been the next person to set on the throne. I think this piece of writing is*

showing us the readers how men had all the power and till this day sometimes they still do.

The internal contradictions in this response reveal Mustang's paradoxical understandings that males can be at the same time all-powerful and powerless. It manifests two foundational beliefs: first, that injustice can work in devious and invisible ways, and second, that rigid rules governing gender roles harm individuals of both sex/genders, as when the prince is forced to take the throne against his wishes. The decision to depose the princess and exile the two women to protect the traditional patriarchal structure seems to Mustang not just unfair but also unwise ("stupid") and obviously not in the people's best interests.

Alyssa's (f) response begins by recognizing that tradition carries with it an enormous psychological weight and that the real problem in this story is not a power struggle but a more diffuse, and thus even less remediable, anxiety about change and a loss of certainty:

Why did they have something against a woman ruling the kingdom. Were they scared of changes or is it because a king is the only one who ruled since man was born. Why were they so determined not to be ruled by a woman. What did they think would change. What's the difference between a man and a woman ruling the kingdom. Do they think men are more powerful than women.

Each of the six sentences in this response re-states, with minor variations and an interrogative inflection, what Alyssa understands as the story's fundamental question. It seems to me that this catalogue of questions suggests that while there may be no rational argument to reject the idea of a female ruler, it is nevertheless a deeply unsettling and threatening possibility. There appears to be predictability, comfort and security in an order that has existed "since man was born."

Alyssa's reading doesn't seem disturbed by, or even aware of, conventions of the fairy-tale genre that might have encouraged her to ignore the layers of meaning and emotion that she sees in the story. As teachers, I think, we tend to imagine that most adolescent readers will be familiar with the most enduring fairy tales, but what of the children whose only exposure to *Sleeping Beauty* is by way of the Disney film adaptation, and who may have missed even that? Is it possible that students do not draw on their knowledge of fairy-tales to help them read "The Little Prince" because this text

skews the expected story just enough, or signals clearly in some way, that it intends or encourages the reader to do something different with it?

Tina-Jo's (f) reading introduces the moral precept that we should be content with what god gives us, which might be loosely translated as being content with the status quo more generally. Her comments articulate a suspicion and, I think, express some sadness, that the queen may have wanted a boy for reasons that include, but are not limited to, her belief that the future would be brighter for the princess if she were a boy. In this light, it is quite possible to regard the queen's plan as evidence that she has rejected her daughter because she is a girl rather than as a positive expression of her desire to ensure that the princess is publicly affirmed and elevated:

> *When she gave birth to a daughter, it said "this time." It did not sound like the queen was happy with what god gave her, it almost sounds like she wanted a boy so that her boy could overrule the king's son.*

Although the text does say that the children were fond of one another, and does not say that they spent most of their time apart, Tina-Jo appears to "read in" an assumption, based on her understanding of the culture around her, that their day-to-day lives would be lived out in separate spheres and that a separation/alienation between male and female siblings is inevitable:

> *In the story it almost sounded like the children did not get to see each other much so how could they be fond of one another?*

This information does not come as a surprise, but as validation of the self-evident truth that the queen was wrong to upset the status quo. Tina-Jo's reading rests on a conviction that the queen demands more for herself and her daughter than they deserve and that the queen only recognizes the citizens' esteem for the princess as it reflects well on herself:

> *Why did they haul out the prince? I think they did this because they know the queen had done wrong in teaching him. The queen and her daughter were exicled because the queen was greedy and wanted her daughter to rule so that the prince would look stupid and everyone would look up to the queen instead of the king.... I think it was good they exiled the queen and the princess because of the fact of greedyness. The king knew what was going on but he could not quite put his hand on it. After the queen was gone everything was*

back to normal and perfect.... The princess won because she was taught sovereignty and the prince was taught nothing except to be shy and polite. I think the queen had it all planned out for the princess to win. She wanted everyone to like her daughter better than the kings son. She wanted everyone to think less of the king and his son.

In this light, the queen is narcissistic, grasping, and immoral. She is wrong to attempt to upset the traditional arrangement, not only because she hurts the prince but because that order was "perfect." Her intent, which this reading apprehends as a desire to favor her daughter and disadvantage the prince, makes her the guilty party.

Tina-Jo's response gives no indication that she recognizes any injustice in a social structure which assumes that the prince is stronger, wiser, and born to rule, and which therefore creates an unjust world for the princess. Nor does her response, which ignores what the traditional story does to the queen and to the princess and condemns the queen for what has been done to girls in most cultures throughout history, seem intentionally ironic. For Tina-Jo, personal responsibility apparently takes precedence over political ideals and injustice has more to do with personal relationships and the betrayal of trust, especially within a family, than it does with repressive social structures. The next portion of Tina-Jo's response, however, sets up an interesting counterpoint to her earlier condemnation of the queen's actions when it switches into a rhetorical mode to espouse equality:

Why not have a woman rule that is just total discrimination on the womens behalf. The king set his word and he has to stick with it so the citizens can't know better.

In this view, it is wrong for the citizens to discriminate on the basis of gender, but it is also wrong for the queen to challenge the institutional barriers which restrict her daughter's future.

Ninja (m) indicates that the queen acknowledges that her proposal is strange (odd, abnormal, unnatural, wrong). He seems to be in agreement with the king, who initially refuses to consider her request, and assigns him the power to choose whether to ignore or pay attention to the queen:

She had to beg because she knew it was a strange request and because she wanted the daughter to win badly. And judging by his response, she probably would have had to beg for him to pay any attention and listen to what she says.

Ninja appears quite confident that he knows what the king is thinking and what the story is designed to reveal about the dynamics of power and sex/gender:

The king assumes that the boy would win by saying it would teach her a lesson.... Why is it more sense for a man to rule, a woman could rule just as well. And the fact that 'They all rose up as one man' goes to show the men rule over the women and are seen as more powerful in this story and time.

This response emphasizes that there is an imbalance of power within this fictional context, but that this situation is not necessarily generalizable to other times and places. It presents a reasonable and reasoned argument for equity which is undermined by Ninja's earlier comments suggesting that a woman ruler is unnatural, that the queen's ambition is wrong, and that the king holds the power to keep his word or revoke it. It also understands that the king's humiliation at being outmaneuvered by the queen, his fear of being wrong, and his need to salve his wounded male pride will take precedence over more rational concerns such as justice, compassion, and integrity:

It doesn't say what the king was mad at first but it was probably because he thought he was tricked because the stepmother knew the princess would win. Or because he was proved wrong.... The queen and her daughter were probably exiled because the king felt like he was tricked by the queen and maybe felt foolish for falling for her skeme.

Tommy's (m) response asks "Why would the daughter want to give the shaft to the other child?" It expresses some reservations about believing that the princess would cooperate in the queen's plot if the children were as well-adjusted as the story suggests. This reading questions whether the mother-child bond is always paramount, suggesting that the queen's power could be undercut by an equally powerful bond between siblings. It overlooks statements in the text that point to the king's negligence, assuming that the king would have noticed if something this odd was happening:

How wouldn't the king not know what his wife was up to.... Wouldn't the king see right through with what the queen was doing?

The queen's most striking trait in this reading is her duplicity:

I believe that the queen kept on nagging to the king because she knew something that the king did not know. She had tutored the children, so one of them is capable of ruling and the other is too timid to be seen as ruler.

As result of the queen's intrigues, the princess is now capable of ruling, but she cannot be ruler because her anatomy is wrong. The prince's anatomy is right, but he is now incapable of ruling because a ruler can't appear to have feminine attributes.

As Tommy reads the queen's plan, she wants her husband and son out of the picture and uses her daughter as a means this end:

What does it mean "the citizens had more sense?" Did the citizens know about the plot of the new queen? That she wanted her daughter to rule, so that she can get the king and prince out of the picture? I believe that the citizens were sexest as they did not want to be "ruled by a woman!"

The more usual reading saw a reverse cause-effect sequence—the queen wants the throne for her daughter, and therefore plots to eliminate the males. The queen seems to be scheming to set up an Amazonian state rather than simply creating an equal opportunity for her daughter. At the same time, Tommy's response insists that it is sexist and wrong for the people to demand a male ruler. Reason, logic, and justice dictate that there is no defensible argument for perpetuating the tradition, but it nevertheless feels proper and natural to do so. The question "Why was the wicked queen and her daughter exiled, and not just the queen?" indicates that Tommy accepts the justice of banishing the queen, but has difficulty with the injustice of punishing the princess for her mother's sins. His concluding statement, "I really didn't like this story as it did not make sense as the transition of this story was not clear." piques my curiosity about what it is that Tommy doesn't like—that is, why he feels confused, displeased, or anxious.

Raine's (f) reading is one of a handful that construct an unabashedly feminist story:

What is wrong with a guy being taught this for once? They usually teach girls to be like this & guys like the princess. I like this for a change. Society usually wants men to be assertive etc. and women to be docile.

Her response is atypical in two ways: it recognizes and delights in the ironic justice of the role-reversal, and it doesn't read the queen's actions as possibly justifiable in an abstract, logical sense, but morally wrong and insidiously destructive in effect. It seems clear to Raine that qualifications, not gender, should determine who will succeed the king. In fact, she argues:

> *The princess is the one who won. They [the citizens] should be thankful that the more capable child would rule.*

Her response asks "How come they let the prince rule?" This question sheds an unusual light on the phrase in the text which reads: "They hauled out the prince and set him on the throne." To "let" him rule assumes that it is the prince's choice and intention to rule, which differs dramatically from an image in which the prince, much like a Raggedy-Andy doll, is "hauled out" and "set" on the throne. Her question "Why did they exile the females?" raises what I thought might have presented a difficulty for readers more often than it apparently does. Are the females exiled because they still pose a threat to the prince's rule, because the citizens want revenge for the queen's duplicity, or for some other reason? Raine's reading concludes with comments that strike me as genuine expressions of emotion rather than empty rhetorical statements:

> *Justice and order were not done! This story was unfair and sexist. It was not right for them to be discriminated because they were female!*

Jaraf's (m) response substitutes the phrase "trying to overrule" for the author's words "begged" and "nagging," a substitution which assumes that the queen possesses at least some degree of power and that her request is a devious attempt to usurp the king's sovereign authority:

> *I understand that when the queen was nagging that she was being a snob, and trying to overrule the king. She seems very persistent and I think if her plan would've worked she would've done something evil, and not good at all for the kingdom.*

Jaraf constructs his reading around two certainties. The first is that powerful women are dangerous, and the second is that "it's not nice to fool with mother nature" where gender is involved, as the result may be calamitous:

I think that the people knew they couldn't be ruled by an irresponsible girl so they got mad and made the king change his mind so that the kingdom would be safe from destruction.... I think that they thought women aren't anywhere good enough to do anything so everybody never gave the princess a chance, and everybody except for the princess and the queen was happy in the end. And all was good, and full the better.

We know that the princess irresponsible, it seems, simply because she is a girl. What could be taken from the text as proof that she is both steady and competent (winning the contest) apparently doesn't enter into Jaraf's image of her. This view grants that women have great power, but not for good. The people are sensible because even though reason, justice, and the evidence suggest otherwise, a female ruler would surely destroy the kingdom. Jaraf's response is liberally strewn with repetition, hyperbole, and absolutes. "Everybody" (apparently the entire population of the kingdom except the queen and the princess) is male, and everybody knows women aren't capable.

It is difficult to say whether Jaraf intends his response to be taken literally or whether he offers it tongue-in-cheek. He may be having some fun with me or he may be expressing some antagonism because he thinks that he is expected to read this piece as a feminist. In either case, his writing voices a (possibly mock) combative urge. I think that it would be a mistake to dismiss Jaraf's comments as simply a satirical send-up of what he thinks I want or his teacher wants, rather than providing him with encouragement to look at the words he actually uses.

In the same way, **Allison's (f)** response reacts immediately and negatively to what she seems to read as a feminist harangue. She replaces "stepmother" with the more contemporary "stepmom," and seems to feel that having a daughter automatically positions the queen as a feminist:

The stepmom sounds like she's for women's equality because "this time a daughter." The woman knew she couldn't reign for herself, so she tryed to push it for her daughter.... She sounds like she wants only a women to reign.... It's weird that the girl is being taught how to be queen and she taught the Son to be quiet and out of the way not to want to be king.

This response creates an unflattering image of the queen—a pushy woman is unattractive and off-putting—and reveals implicit disapproval of both the queen and her plan. The term "woman" apparently signals a political position. The queen's interest in her daughter's future becomes a desire to appropriate male power for women as a group, which is strange and unnatural behavior. While many readings assumed that the princess must have actively participated in learning the skills which win the contest, the princess that emerges in Allison's reading is entirely passive—she is accomplished, but she is also her mother's patsy.

Marylin Manson's (m) response questions why the word wicked is introduced, but quickly offers an answer—"I feel she is because she wants her daughter to take over the kingdom." The queen's attempt to destabilize traditional gendered power structures is wicked. M.M.'s question is not whether this reversal of the norm would cause harm, but "How could it not cause any harm?" On reading that the queen's plan had succeeded and the prince had lost, M.M. wonders "Why was the king angry?" The first time his response poses this query, it is entirely open-ended. The question is repeated, however, with a slight variation in the tone and emphasis: "Why was he angry at his own son?" Here, the question seems more pointed, and slightly plaintive. The addition of the word "own" suggests that the father-son bond is a very close one, and the emphasis indicates something closer to hostility, anxiety, or sadness than detached curiosity. The prince's part in the plan seems innocent, so the king has no reason to be angry with him. M.M. suggests that there may be other causes or targets of the king's anger, but doesn't explore them, and he doesn't take for granted that the citizens will be interested in who governs the kingdom. He admits that the princess may know more than the prince, but it doesn't necessarily follow that she will be allowed to rule:

> *Why do they care who runs the country? What if the woman knew more than the men? Why won't they be ruled by a woman?*

I wonder if M.M.'s last question is a casual dismissal of the citizens' concerns or a real query, and what he would say if asked to guess at an answer. Another series of questions reveals confusion and ambivalence and seems sometimes tongue-in-cheek. This reading apparently accepts the notion of justice in the abstract. The king made a deal, the princess won the contest, and therefore, she should keep the throne. However, it seems that, when

applied on an individual level, power is too diffuse and shape-shifting to be contained by the language of justice and equality. In this response, the prince has the power to choose and is not as emasculated and spineless as in some readings. It was not necessarily unjust to make the princess ruler, but only if the prince didn't want it, and it is not his weakness or his femininity but the rules of fair play that require that the king honor his word and the prince be exiled:

> *How and why did they hall him out instead of askeing him to come out? Why was the justice broken in the first place? What if the prince didn't want to become king? ... I think that the prince should be exiled or not allowed to become king if his father maid the deal and if the princess could run the kingdom in a better way and was smarter than the prince.*

It seems here that the queen's plan and the princess's victory were not in themselves nihilistic, which contradicts M.M.'s first comments. By a logical, linear argument for equity, the prince may reject the male role and the princess may succeed to the throne by default, but she may not appropriate what is rightfully his. However, the numerous qualifying "ifs" and "what ifs" create a great deal of doubt around this conclusion. In his first statements, emotion contradicts reason; M. M. "feels" that the queen is wicked and that the status quo will be threatened.

Mercedes' (f) first reaction is a political statement about the queen's desire to free her daughter from dependence on men and to open up new possibilities for women in general. This statement recognizes the asymmetry and inequality of traditional sex/gender relations, but discusses it as a historical problem that may not apply today.

> *Like the mother wanted her daughter to be independent, to rule all by herself without the help of a man. She wanted her daughter to be the first woman to rule all by herself. ... In that time women weren't sapose to be good at math or any other sport they were to be at home cooking, cleaning and looking after the children. ... In some ways she is selfish because she only wants good things to happen to her daughter and not to her stepson.*

When the queen's theoretical beliefs about a hypothetical situation are translated into an action that impacts real people, her plan is no longer obviously right or defensible.

Everyone joined together to be strong as a man was sapose to be. They didn't want to be ruled by a woman. They felt they knew what was best for them than the queen. They felt she would be to sweet or nice and not strong, like a real man.

Mercedes knows that women are not reputed/expected to be strong, while this is a defining trait for a "real man." In the same way, men are not supposed to be sweet or nice because these are female qualities and are despised in a ruler. A man who is masculine (i.e., hard, strong, and aggressive) is the best ruler. The hierarchy of human beings based on gender-linked characteristics seems to look something like this to Mercedes as well as many other readers: A masculine male is at the apex, a masculine female is rated second, a feminine female is rated a distant third, and a feminine/feminized/gay male finishes last. The first two categories are extremely stable, while the second two are much less rigid and often change places from one reading to another. Mercedes attempts to explain the citizen's behavior by appealing to a biologistic/essentialist model of sex/gender, but in the end, the appeal of such a model seems to be emotional rather than rational:

They demanded a mail rule their kingdom and forced the king's son to rule weather or not he wanted to. They sent the queen and her daughter away so she wouldn't try anything like this again.

Mercedes' next statement is interesting, given the information "in" the story that the prince is entirely passive and that the king is too busy to notice his wife and children until the children reach the age of succession:

This story makes women look dependent on men. Like without them they can't do anything or make an important decision without consulting them first. Like women are not alowed to be smart or able to rule by themselves.

Most readers deduce that the queen does make at least one crucial decision about the children without consulting anybody, least of all her husband. She does beg his permission, but in an assertive way, when she needs to go public with a plan that she has already secretly carried out.

Adrian's (f) response admits confusion as she attempts to construct her reading around her conception that the status and power of a monarch who reigns by right of birth and succession is equivalent to that of the spouse of such a monarch:

I don't understand why she wants her daughter to rule by herself. If the queen was married & reigned the kingdom with the king why wouldn't she want the same for her daughter.

Her reading seems not to recognize the formal nature and the actual impotence of the queen's position and is not complicated by a knowledge of traditional laws of succession and primogeniture which, for many readers, raised some difficult moral, ethical, and legal questions. Adrian's reading, as Honda's did, presumes that the queen tutors the children herself. Both of these responses credit her with absolute control over them and a thorough knowledge of a broad spectrum of both masculine and feminine roles:

The stepmother taught her daughter to assume she could rule the kingdom & the son not to be outspoken, to be sweet etc. The stepmother did this because she wanted her daughter to rule by herself.... The queen asked her king to have a test between the children to see who could rule the kingdom because she knew her daughter would win cause she taught her everything & not the son. The king didn't want to do this because he didn't think it would be right for a woman to rule the kingdom. The prince lost because he wasn't taught to do any of that stuff.

Adrian's reading emphasizes the queen's conviction that she can and has equipped her daughter with everything she needs to become ruler. The king also seems to accept that learning can outweigh biology and that gender traits are sufficiently malleable to allow the princess to win. The role of learning appears to collide with the role of nature in the differentiation of traits and the separation of spheres on the basis of sex/gender. The king *knows* that his daughter is now better equipped to rule than his son, but, at the same time, he *knows* that it would not be "right" (proper, suitable, just, virtuous, ethically or morally sanctioned) for a woman to rule the kingdom.

In this reading, the king is angry because his son is inadequate rather than happy that his daughter is successful. Adrian introduces the possibility that if the king had known what the queen was doing, he may (should?) have been more tolerant of his son's inadequacy, and that the major reason for his anger is an unconscious identification of his own masculinity with his son's:

The king was angry at him because his son couldn't do the necessary job. But the king didn't know that his son wasn't taught those things. He was probably angry at his own son also because he wanted his first born son to rule the kingdom after him.

This reading has no apparent difficulty with the archaic concept of the citizenry as male. It adopts their voice and articulates their feelings about the situation quite smoothly and naturally, without indicating explicitly whether Adrian agrees with the (male) citizens or not. Her response comes close to indicating that Adrian shares the citizens' point of view, but it may also be an attempt to lay out the literal facts or it may be intended as ironic:

They all rose up as one man means they all spoke together because they felt very strongly about being ruled by a woman. It had never been that way before & [they] didn't want it changed now. The citizens had more sense then the king because the king had chosen a women to rule after him.

The citizens value tradition and continuity, and their anxiety about change would cause them to resist any significant alteration.

The next portion of Adrian's response casts the abrupt removal of the princess from the throne as reasonable, justified, and properly compensatory:

They took out the princess and replaced her with the prince to rule the kingdom & to set things straight. Everyone was happy they settled everything everything was the way it was suppose to be. The wicked queen and unlucky daughter were upset because they didn't win. They had gotten kicked out of the kingdom forever for what they had done.

The princess has been "taken out" (erased, disappeared, murdered) in order to "set things straight" (not roundabout, crooked, or deviant). Things and people were put back in their proper places and everybody was content. At the same time, Adrian contradicts this sanguine view—"everyone" was not happy. Her reading attempts to smooth out discord and leave everyone satisfied by not attending to how the queen and her daughter experience the kingdom's return to sanity and tranquillity, but it seems unable to avoid some misgivings about their fate.

Adrian makes it clear that her own view is consistent with what she reads as the moral of the story—that the traditional order by which men direct and control while women assist and serve is the proper one:

> *I feel that it is true, a prince should become king & rule the whole kingdom. The queen should help and be there for the king. If you change it to a woman it would make to many problems & nobody would like it.* [An arrow indicates that the paragraph marked below should be inserted here.] *Order was restored, I think that means that the citizens feel that men have more control and can manage things like a kingdom better than a woman.*
>
> {*it isn't common for a women to rule I think it should depend on the education that a person has to become a ruler.*}

Adrian apparently believes that the conflict and discord which change causes are in themselves a bad thing, which seems to be reason enough to reject what "isn't common" and protect the status quo. She creates some ambiguity about her position, however, with an addendum that has no punctuation to indicate a pause or to clarify the relationship between two contradictory ideas: that it is uncommon (and therefore wrong) for women to rule, and that education should determine who rules.

Curtis (m) begins his commentary on the story by stepping outside the narrative to wonder who constructed the story and for what purpose:

> *Why is the stepmother wicked? Who's telling the story? The prince or the king? Why would a wicked stepmother marry a king?*

Curtis's reading does not presume that an increase in power and status would be reason enough to marry a monarch. Nor does it depend on a familiarity with either the fairy-tale genre or the rules surrounding royal succession. It appears to be based on an assumption of equality and draws on an understanding that love and loyalty are incompatible with competition and aggression—a fact which raises a question about how the queen secured the children's cooperation. Not only is it puzzling that the children would participate, but their equally good natures should apparently have melted the queen's resolve:

> *If both children were fond of each other, why would they agree to take the test? Why would the wicked woman want only her daughter to reign alone? Why can't both children reign the kingdom? If both children were good, why would the wicked woman make sure that she got her way?*

This response appears blissfully ignorant of sexed/gendered power struggles and institutionalized patriarchy. It suggests that the prince and princess could rule mutually and harmoniously, and it poses questions that may be, or may only appear to be, willfully naive or disingenuous.

Similarly, Curtis's idea of marriage seems inconsistent with an imbalance of power between the king and queen. He does not assume that she has no power other than the power of persuasion to secure a desired end. Instead, he assumes that she can command obedience:

> *If there married why would the wicked queen beg the king for a small favor?*
> *Why didn't the queen just demand it, instead of begging and nagging?*

Curtis acknowledges that the king's anger is a significant and emotionally charged problem. His comments underscore the relationship between father and son by deliberately substituting a possessive pronoun in the phrase "his son" for an objective and non-relational phrase that was to begin with "the" (likely "the prince" or "the son"). The word "mad" gains resonance with each repetition:

> *Who was the king mad at besides his son? Why was he mad at ~~the~~ his son?*
> *Why did he keep his word if he was so mad?*

On a conscious level, Curtis's response expresses surprise that gender politics enters into the citizens' decision to refuse the princess as ruler. It asks "Why did it really matter who was to rule the kingdom?" However, the presence of the intensifier "really" undercuts this non-partisan, egalitarian reading and suggests that it *does* matter, even though it should not. I hear a strong emotional undercurrent in Curtis's response that complicates and subverts an otherwise innocent, coolly logical, and impartial stance:

> *What didn't the citizens want a woman to rule them? How did the citizens know who would rule?*
> *Why did they haul out the prince and set him on the throne? Why was the wicked queen and her daughter exiled forever?*
> *Why was the order restored? Wasn't there order from the begginning?*
> *Did the daughter do a bad job?*
> *Why ~~didn't~~ the daughter get exiled forever? It was only the wicked woman who should have been exiled.*

It may be that Curtis's response arbitrarily chooses certain facts and reformats them as questions, but the choice of details and the manner in which they are reformulated are revealing. It seems determinedly even-handed, open-minded, and resistant to recognizing the conflict and discord that resulted when the queen destabilized the existing structure. It also introduces the possibility, which may be comforting, that some time elapsed between the princess' succession and her exile and that during this time she proved to be an incompetent ruler. In one of the few declarative constructions in Curtis's response, he states that the queen deserved to be exiled. This statement contradicts his "no big deal" attitude about the question of who will succeed the king. She deserves the punishment because her plan was a bad one. Meanwhile, questions about the princess' fate and its justice or injustice are left hanging.

The choice to center the story around any character other than the king seems strange to Curtis. He assumes that the story is about the king, and that an author would more normally adopt his perspective. In this instance, however, "The author talks more about the children and the wicked woman then the king." The cumulative weight of these disinterested statements of fact indicates that Curtis's response is more influenced by his understanding of gender politics than may at first have been apparent:

> *I think the story was more about the gender of the ruler of the kingdom than anything.*
>
> *I think the story has a lot of gender stereotyping in it. For example the wicked woman wanted only her daughter to rule, and the citizens wanted only the son to rule.*

It recognizes that the central conflict in the story revolves around gender but avoids disclosing Curtis's personal investment by keeping the discussion on a very abstract and "correct" level. Curtis seems to "know" that gender stereotyping is wrong, so his response analyzes the issues in the story while carefully avoiding any mention or examination of his affective response.

Cosmo's (m) response views the unfolding plot from the children's point of view. It expresses concern about their status as free agents and strives to understand events from the princess's subjective position:

How old were the children when she decided she wanted her daughter to rule? Did her daughter realize that she was a part of her mother's plan for the kingdom?

Does the prince like his stepmother?

It also questions the prince's feelings for his stepmother and attempts to simplify them by introducing the vague, deceptively simple, but highly abstract and emotionally loaded word "like." By contrast, the concept appears irrelevant to a discussion of the princess's relationship to her mother. Instead, it asks for very specific information about the level of honesty and mutuality between mother and daughter, which presupposes a relationship too complex to be encompassed by the word "like." At this point, it adopts the prince's perspective, asking to what extent the boy was aware that he was being emasculated:

Did the prince realize that he was being taught to be weaker? If the king saw the prince at least once in a while, wouldn't he notice a change in his behavior? ... Did he ever become suspicious of his queen for trying to take the kingdom?

I think the king should have known something was going on when out of nowhere she asks for the more capable to rule.

In Cosmo's experience, a father who has even minimal contact with his son would notice and presumably order an end to a harmful influence that threatens to warp the natural course of the boy's development. He appears to have some difficulty constructing an image of a king who would be so credulous, and therefore translates the queen's desire to see her daughter on the throne into a hostile takeover of the kingdom. "Trying to take the kingdom" precludes the possibility that the four could maintain harmonious family relationships while the princess assumes the throne rather than her brother. Although there is nothing objectively "in" the text to indicate that the queen's unconventional child-rearing practices were kept secret, in Cosmo's reading the queen's stratagem comes "out of nowhere."

At this point, Cosmo's response attempts to place the story in a historical context. It asks a question in the present tense, but phrases the answer in the past tense. The effect is to place male privilege and the silencing of women in a bygone era. At the same time, a

question wondering how the women felt about being silenced does reveal an awareness that the existence of male privilege is not simply a curious historical phenomenon:

> *What year is this taking place? Were the citizens composed of men and women? Or just men? Since they rose up as one man, I guess only the men had a say in what went on. How did the women feel about not having a say?*

Cosmo's reading expresses some indignation about the injustice done the princess when the citizens punish her for the queen's misdeeds.

> *Why would they throw out the princess with the queen, she didn't do anything wrong.*

The phrasing of this question assumes that unlike the princess, the queen *did* do something wrong. It focuses attention on the prince's *feelings* about becoming king and about the fate of his sister and stepmother, rather than analyzing whether or not it was a legally or morally defensible decision:

> *Did the prince want to become king? Was he happy that his stepmother and sister were banished? It says order was restored, but does that mean that that incident caused a lot of chaos?*

An arrow immediately after "chaos" indicates that the following question, added after several intervening thoughts, should be inserted here: "Did the son feel any differently towards his stepmother or sister because they took away his kingdom?" The question acknowledges that the success of the queen's plan causes much personal and public distress and assumes that the kingdom legally belongs to the prince. It then queries an easy distinction between "order" and "chaos" and asks whether the situation fits Cosmo's definition of the word "chaos." It ignores abstract intellectual, moral, and legal questions to focus instead on the emotional and practical implications of a problem that has its roots in gender apartheid. Cosmo's next-to-last comment offers his reading of the ironic justice offered in the story's resolution:

> *The real injustice in this story is that they through out the one other person fit to rule the kingdom. And they were left with an incompitant prince.*

In **Viper's (m)** reading, images of the innocent children collide with an image of the wicked queen, causing him to ponder his opinion of her:

When it says healthy, affectionate, good and kind, maybe it means that the children are not like their mother. Maybe the mother is the opposite of the children. She sounds like those kind of women that want everything to be equal when it comes to gender or more than equal.

His response contends that the queen is bad, presumably because of her feminist desire for equality. She represents "those kind of women" that demand equality, but, in four words and without the pause suggested by a period or a comma, equality transmutes into domination. As far as I can determine, Viper reads the story at its most straightforward, literal level. Rather than empathizing with either child, his response attempts to weigh which parent is more guilty for creating a situation which harms both children:

What if the king was around, he wouldn't allow this so, in a way, its the king's fault. But she had no right to favor one child. She was putting on an act because if their was a test, the girl would win over the boy because of the way she brought them up. She begged because she knows he wouldn't allow a girl to rule.

Viper appears to weigh the relevant evidence and conclude that the queen's attempt to usurp male power is a more serious offense than the king's negligence. She is dishonest and uses her children as pawns in a contest that is intended not to determine the most capable ruler but to win a power struggle between the king and queen. This reading is premised on an assumption that the king is backed by institutional power which is outmatched by the queen's machiavellian tactics. Another assumption shoring up this reading is that gender roles are not biologically determined. Rather, they are learned and there is something inherently right and natural in the learning that takes place with respect to gender and power. In spite of the queen's interference in the normal course of differentiation by gender, "The king set the tests because he thought his son would win and that she would never ask again." In much the same way, Viper seems to regard the citizens' rejection of a female ruler as evidence that they are emotional, irrational, and stubborn: "They wanted a man to rule no matter what. That's probably why they hauled him out."

Jacqueline's (f) response departs from the story to tell me how Jacqueline *thinks* the ideal family *should* function, but it doesn't tell me very much about how she *feels*

families (specifically or in general) actually *do* function. Her idealized image may be a reflection, in part, of the fantasy portrayed in popular culture media of the family as a space in which every member, including (particularly) children, is heard, understood, and treated with respect.:

> *As a family I think that not one individual should have a higher power over any one else, every one should be treated with the same respect for one another, royal or not! I think that once again they should always be taught the same morals and thoughts. Then when they get older and are responsible enough for the roll of king or queen then they should have a chance to become the ruler.*

Her reading seems to deliberately circumvent the problem of gender. Instead, it constructs a utopian vision of the future that both the prince and princess should be prepared for. Her response moves very quickly from the characters and the action in the story to a theoretical discussion of justice, equality, and child-rearing as abstract concepts. It accepts the premise that only one child can win in a competition to decide the ruler:

> *Well in a way I think both children should have a chance but they should be raised the same way. Also cared for just as much after one is chosen.*

The ideal of justice demands not only that neither child be given automatic preference when choosing the king's successor but also that they should receive the same unisex education. What might seem to be an inconsequential afterthought raises two issues. First, it separates the economy of scarcity that dominates winning from the economy of affluence that dominates love—there can be only one winner, but there is no restriction on caring. Second, the choice of the word "chosen" implies that even though ability determines a winner, somebody (the king? the citizens?) possesses the arbitrary power to accept or reject the whole person. The word carries with it a religious connotation of "chosen" which is to be elected for salvation through a capricious deity's undeserved beneficence.

Jacqueline's reading equates natural intelligence with the training that the princess received, and the prince's shy and gentle nature with mental dullness. Intelligence and

leadership appear to be male traits even though an exceptional female might possess them:

> *Well I don't think the citizens were right at all because the princess was the one that had the intelligants in the family to continue. I think its just the fact of she was a woman and we as a society should learn to recognize that man is no different from women.*

It recognizes that resistance to change is a reaction to the anxiety it causes, but treats such a backward attitude with disdain and sarcasm:

> *They just thought as citizens that they should continue tradition. It seems only normal to have a young man the next ruler. We wouldn't want a young girl to get in there things might change and become a little bit more fair for both women and men. I will say one last time, men and women are no different, but as individuals we are all different.*

Although the argument is a feminist one, this invocation of patriarchal tradition calls up the specter of deviancy. The ironic bite and the deliberate ambiguity of the male voice of sanity that this response mimics may indicate a disjuncture between knowledges and beliefs operating at different levels of awareness. Jacqueline's reading draws on feminist rhetoric about equality and mutual respect but it also provide brief glimpses of an emotional investment in an imaginary world in which gender does not influence how well parents love their children and is irrelevant to determining success, prosperity, or happiness.

Theresa's (f) reading seems to infer something ominous in the first few sentences that causes her to be suspicious of the queen's motives for marrying the king and prompts the question "Why did she marry the king in the first place?" The queen's desire to see her daughter on the throne is a mystery, as is a mother who would put her daughter forward at her son's expense:

> *Why was the queen's ambition for her daughter to reign alone? Why her daughter?*
>
> *Why did she bring up the prince so shy, gentle, ladylike?*

The third question, which seems to follow logically from the previous two, asks why the queen chose to feminize (emasculate) the prince. It substitutes the word "ladylike" for the

words "demure" and "docile" which the text uses to describe the prince. The adjectives, taken together, are definitely understood as describing feminine qualities. The question doesn't recognize or actively chooses not to acknowledge possible reasons for the queen's actions. Theresa's response attempts to get inside the king's head and to view the story from his perspective. It focuses more on the king's feelings and motivation than the queen's or the children's:

> *Why was the king angry with himself or his son? Why did the king keep his word, what was in the king's head at that time.*

The implication is that the king's anger is unintelligible from any perspective. In this reading, the queen seems to be the smartest and most capable character in the story, and should therefore become monarch. It considers only ability, and ignores the difficulty of reconciling the ideal of justice and the reality of unjust practices.

> *I have to agree with the Queen because I see no difference in being ruled by a king rather than a woman. I think that the queen should rule her kingdom.*

Conclusion

As with all eight of the selections that I asked students to read, "The Little Prince" appeared to tap into some deep psychological structures. In particular, this one seemed to evoke strong anxieties, desires, and fantasies around the idea of family and the nature of parent-child relationships. Human beings inevitably come into the world with immature cognitive and perceptual structures, which only later, in the normal course of development, mature sufficiently to allow us to process events and people in the world around us with some degree of comfort. The infant is overwhelmed by ambivalent feelings of love and hate toward the individuals who arbitrarily satisfy or deny his/her physical and emotional needs. These people who initially occupy a small circle around the infant, beginning with the mother or primary caregiver and moving outward to include the other parent and family members, are perceived through these filters of extreme emotion and absolute dependence as larger-than-life and absolutely powerful. Reconciling these early impressions with the more mature and cognitively sophisticated images that we construct later in life is a very demanding and confusing task. Responses to the king, the queen, and their two children reveal students' preoccupation with the task

of making sense of these earliest relationships with parents and with siblings as they impact and complicate the parent-child relationship.

The story was also very cleverly designed, I believe, to encourage a reader to engage in the oedipal struggle, whereby we strive to constitute ourselves within and with respect to these relationships. The characters are male and female individuals who are struggling to define themselves within a nuclear family, but they are also "king," "queen," "prince," and "princess." This means that a reader is encouraged to view these primary relationships not as purely private, asocial entities, but as determined by and within what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order—that is, the larger social context of language, law, and politics. The king and queen are parents, but the way they see themselves and their children is very much determined by how the citizens see them and what they demand. Students' responses to the story are caught up in defining and evaluating how parents should treat their children, but they also spend a great deal of time asking themselves what it means to "love" your child when that love is situated within and defined by a larger socio-political context.

The text provokes a debate, on an immediate and concrete level of visual and tactile images which Lacan calls the Imaginary Order, about the degree to which learning and social conditioning can/do modify the expression of a purely natural and instinctual connection between parent and child. Students' comments also show that most students imagine the bond between mother and child to be more powerful and more conflicted than that between father and child. In Lacanian terms, the mother-child relationship is more heavily imbued with the affective, psychic content of the Real than that between father and child. This, to me, makes sense given that in this culture, the more usual arrangement has the mother as the infant's primary caregiver. The other major debate triggered by this text centers around the problem of defining and interpreting male and female roles in a more general sense. Students explicitly identify some of the ways in which the oedipal struggle plays itself out in the patriarchal structures of both the fictional family and the kingdom. Their responses illustrate that these structures are not simply expressions of an imbalance of power whereby males dominate because they can but are, instead/in addition, the product of complex, fundamentally ambivalent, and at least partially realized desires of both males and females.

Notes: Chapter Four

1 Suniti Namjoshi, "The Little Prince," In *Gender Issues*, ed. G. H. Nemiroff, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1993, p. 103. For the complete text of The Little Prince, see Appendix 1.

2 See, for example, Elizabeth Wright's discussion of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lacan's term "Desire of the Mother" in "Structural Psychoanalysis: Psyche as Text," 1998, pp. 99-119; and Ildiko Mohacsy "Mother, the all-powerful: An examination of childhood and mythological fantasy," 1998).

Chapter Five: "Behind Times"

My Approach to the Text

In consultation with the classroom teacher, after I had looked at the students' responses to "The Little Prince" but before I had the time to study them carefully, I decided to approach the reading of "Behind Times" differently than I had the previous text.[1] It seemed to us at the time that responses to "The Little Prince" were very interesting, but that we would have liked them to be more focused. They did not always address what we believed was most interesting about the text and about students' attitudes toward it, and were so idiosyncratic as to be difficult to discuss meaningfully or to thematize. Rather than reading "Behind Times" to the students and then inviting them to respond freely, I read it aloud to them once, passed out copies of the text, and read it aloud once more. I then asked them to respond to some questions that I formulated, and passed those out. Although I tried to avoid making assumptions about what students would notice or say and to make the questions as open-ended and non-directive as possible, it later became clear that the questions are neither open-ended nor non-directive—in fact, they leave very little room for students to comment on their feelings, their particular observations, and their individual reading strategies. The following are the questions I asked them to consider in some way:

1. How did you react to this story? Did you find it funny or enjoyable, or did you find it irritating or silly? Try to explain what you liked or did not like about it.
2. Do you think the author is simply trying to be funny, or is he possibly trying to use humor to get the reader thinking about a more serious issue? If so, what do you think it is that he wants us to think about?
3. Did the article make you think about the question of unwanted sexual advances from a female toward a male, from a male toward a female, or between two people of the same sex? Did it change your ideas at all? If so, in what way?
4. Can you tell what the author's opinion on the subject of sexual harassment is? Do you agree or disagree with what you think the author's point of view is?
5. Do you have any other comments or questions about unwanted sexual advances that have come to mind as a result of the story, or any general comments that you would like to make?

My Reading

"Behind Times" is a text that I characterize as less open, or more circumscribed, than "The Little Prince." By that I mean that it does not invite the reader to use the text as a

screen on which to project purely private fantasies and desires in the same way that the first text does. It is more contemporary, more colloquial, and its surface meaning is more accessible, although its accessibility does not appear to be a function of its difficulty as measured by a scale of reading difficulty. It is also more "realistic," which meant that students seemed not as willing to offer the same kinds of fantasy-based readings that they did in response to "The Little Prince." However, their responses did prove to me that even when the text is a more closed or determinate one, it still functions as an object onto which the reader fastens an almost unlimited array of desires and anxieties.

As I read it, "Behind Times" is a humorous personal essay written by a middle-aged baby-boomer in response to an incident of sexual harassment experienced by Stephen, his eighteen-year-old son. Its tone is frivolous and mock tragic as it relates how Stephen came home from a date and told his parents that while he was dancing at a disco earlier that evening, an attractive young woman "pinched him on the bum." When he turned around in surprise, the "assaulter" gave Stephen a "cheeky grin." My amusement and enjoyment of this story results largely from my appreciation of several layers of irony. Behind the melodramatic lamentations which the father offers as genuine but which he expects the reader to hear as counterfeit lies whatever the reader imagines to be the author's genuine perceptions and feelings about the incident. Stephen's "real" thoughts, his literal comments to his father, and his father's pseudo-naive, solemn recounting of these comments for the reader set up ironic echoes, as do the reverberations between the literal story about a young man being touched improperly by a young woman and an implied or shadow story in which the genders of the assaulter and the victim are interchanged. The story adopts a mock "hip" tone that deliberately misses its mark to bewail the danger that Stephen faced and the unfortunate differences between the popular cultures of the 1950s and the 1980s. Students' responses attend to some, all, or none of these elements, as well as to many others that were not factors influencing my reading.

Several over-arching motifs began to emerge as I studied student responses to "Behind Times." The first is the repeated appearance of certain adjectives and the singularity of others that students chose to describe their reactions to the story. The second coalesces around varying notions about the existence and the meaning of a generation gap that foils communication between parents and teenagers. Several

responses insisted that the story is dated and that the author, trying too hard to sound young, "hip," and amusing, succeeds only in sounding hopelessly out of touch and a little pathetic. The third dominant theme concerns students' attempts to reconcile their pre-existing ideas about sex/gender roles and behaviors with sometimes incongruent images offered by the text. Students struggled in various ways with questions that the text prompted for them about whether a boy or a girl would "really" behave in the way the author seems to be suggesting. The fourth centers around the very different ways that students visualized the incident described in "Behind Times" and how they incorporated the resulting images into their own anxieties and fantasies around flirting, dating, sexual contact, sexual harassment, and rape.

As with all five of the texts that I have considered in detail, I have allowed my readings of students' responses to determine the shape of this chapter. It seemed to me that in this case, it would be most productive to spend less time tracing how individual students develop their readings and more time on how these readings play off, against, and with each other. This is not to deny, however, that one of the primary purposes of this study is to explore the possibilities of helping students to focus on a close and detailed reading of their responses.

Connecting Threads

English 23 students and the funny, annoying, silly, difficult, very good, boring, excellent, lousy, dangerous, strange, *stupid* story

I found the words that students use to characterize the story, or their general reaction to the story, endlessly fascinating. Probably in large part because my first question introduced it, students mentioned the word "funny" twenty-four times. In many cases, the word seemed to indicate quite simply that the reader enjoyed the humor suggested by the text. Other uses of the word, however, were more complicated. Several responses linked the word funny with another to suggest that the story was not *simply* amusing. **Mustang's (f)** comments, for example, indicate that she is bemused and possibly a little bit frustrated:

> *I thought the story was funny and I enjoyed reading it but some parts were difficult to understand. I [don't?] understand what the story is trying to get to.*

Alyssa's (f) response also communicates some frustration, but it draws particular attention to the distancing effect of the unfamiliar language:

> *It's funny but it's hard to understand with all those words. It was silly too because of the use of words.*

Tina-Jo (f) also notes that the story confuses her and that its language posed some difficulty, but her affective reaction is quite different from Alyssa'a in that she does not appear to discount or reject the story as a consequence:

> *I thought the story was very good, but I don't understand the point of it. I also found it funny and enjoyable. I liked the fact (though it was funny) when the girl just went up behind him and pinched his behind. The story is defidently something I would read again and maybe even pass on to someone else.*

Tina-Jo' attempts to articulate her initial impression, but her response reaches a point at which it falters and seems to tie itself into a verbal knot, communicating doubt and confusion about exactly what she wants or intends to say.

Allison and Theresa both found the story funny. They agree that the author probably intended to make the reader laugh, but that he may have had another, more important, reason for writing the story. **Allison's (f)** reading recognizes the humor in the story, but seems to be more impressed by its cautionary message. She seems to accept that what she hears as an implied warning makes good sense. It seems that the scenario Lautens describes resonates with an uncomfortable sense that the adolescent dating scene can pose some very real danger:

> *Maybe the author is just trying to be funny, but possibly he could be trying to tell you that men can be assulted not just women and to look out for yourself at other places... because its the 90's and sexual advances are something we cannot hide from.*

Theresa (f) agrees with Allison that the author's use of humor in "Behind Times" is a deliberate technique which serves a double purpose. It makes the reader laugh, but it also draws attention to a "real (serious)" problem, the recent deterioration of male-female relations. Paradoxically, it also helps the reader to "get past" (set aside, ignore, repress) the anxiety that a more direct discussion of sexual harassment would open up:

quite obviously so bizarre as to be ridiculous. In **Jacqueline's (f)** reading, the humor is laced with an acerbic sting: "At the same time it was funny in a sarcastic way."

"Stupid" is another expression that did not appear in the text or in my questions but that students used repeatedly. On first impression, the word may appear to be simply a lazy choice which suggests nothing more than an innocuous, generalized disapproval. In many instances, however, it seemed to me that students chose the word very deliberately to express not just the difficulty of articulating complex and elusive feelings more precisely, but a positive resistance to doing so. **Tina Jo (f)** uses the word stupid to express something that sounds like a contemptuous dismissal of people who sexually harass others:

> *I don't think it is right for people to be doing this at all and why do people do it? Are they stupid? Or don't they have anything better to do?*

She may also be using it to counter arguments such as the following: "What's all the fuss about?," "Where's your sense of humor?," or "Lighten up. It's only fun!"

For **Ninja (m),** the word stupid seems to carry the weight of an unspoken/unspeakable anxiety about homosexuality. He believes that if a boy were to carry on as described in the story (i.e., behave like a girl), people would despise and reject him as something far worse than girlish, weird, or stupid—they would label him "gay":

> *The author's opinion is that guys should be able to take sexual harasement just the way girls do without it being a big weird thing. The thing that is stupid is that if a guy were to react like that people would think he's gay or stupid or something like that which I think is stereotypical.*

Tommy's (m) response uses the word "irritating" twice and the word "stupid" three times, apparently to underscore his displeasure and skepticism:

> *I found this story irritating. I found it irritating because it showed a 18 year old male getting pinched in the butt by a woman. The way he [Stephen] reacted was pretty stupid, because if I saw a well-figured beautiful lady I would feel good because I would know I still got it!... I believe that this story is pretty stupid in the fact she pinched his butt. Now, if she were to touch him somewhere else, that I would consider a serious issue.... I found it funny and*

stupid because the guy should have got with the girl. It was a sign that the girl wanted him, but he ignored it.

Both the girl's action and Stephen's reaction are labeled "stupid" (dazed, simpleminded, unintelligent, incomprehensible, ridiculous) for at least four reasons: 1)a girl would not pinch a guy's bottom; 2) if she did, a guy would not object; 3) in the event that Tommy is mistaken about 1 and 2, the girl would be more likely to touch him "somewhere else."

The fourth and apparently the most important reason for Tommy's irritation, however, seems to be his certainty that he would feel very lucky if he was the recipient of such an explicit invitation. Tommy seems to use the word stupid to communicate his feeling that the story didn't match his idea of reality, but also to convey his frustration at the text's refusal to cooperate with a fantasy in which an ordinary guy (much like himself!) is the object of an attractive stranger's desire. His remarks sound to me more than a little defensive and resistant, adopting a macho "cool dude" posture, insisting that Tommy would be pleased and flattered to receive the kind of attention that Stephen does, since it would let him know "I still got it." It would put to rest any anxiety he might be feeling about lacking or losing "It" (his masculine sexual power, the phallus), which he seems to imagine as a subtle but unmistakable aura that telegraphs his sexual potency and his "all man" status to members of the opposite sex. It ignores the issue of a physical transgression, speaking only about how Tommy would feel if he *saw* a "well-figured beautiful lady," not if she pinched him.

It seems significant that Tommy's response refers to the twenty-year-old assaulter as a "lady," while the text uses three words—girl, woman, and female—that have very different connotations. His choice excludes the possibility that either the girl or her behavior are cheap, provocative, outrageous, or frowned on in polite society. Tommy, like Alyssa, is put off by the suggestion that a pinch on the behind is objectionable, threatening, or even transgressive, apparently considering the buttocks to be a fairly neutral body zone. He implies that an adolescent's dating and social milieu might well involve more explicitly sexual contact. The next three observations, taken from different portions of Tommy's response, imply an attitude that sounds to me something like stoic acceptance of an unpleasant fact:

These are the 90's, and sexual advances isn't something you can hide from... I disagree with the author's point of view because these are the 90's, live with it... If you cannot live with the way society is changing I guess that you will be a loner because you will never go out.

The structure of the first statement suggests, by articulating the idea and emphasizing it through negation, that hiding from a harsh reality of contemporary life, while not practical or possible, might nevertheless be the desired course of action. It seems that while sexual liberation is here to stay, it can also be the source of a great deal of anxiety. Tommy's response illustrates one of the strategies that a person might use to manage this anxiety, which is to cloak it in feigned nonchalance and defensive bravado. His last sentence, however, intrudes on and subverts this effect, suggesting that the new code governing sexual conduct implies that a person who worries about being molested will be forced to avoid social situations entirely. To move around freely is to accept at least some degree of risk.

Along with words like "funny," "silly," and "stupid," students chose a number of other words that, in my view, announce discomfort, anxiety, displeasure, dismissal, and a desire to see themselves as grown-up and sophisticated. **Cosmo's (m)** response observes:

At first I found it kind of funny because Stephen was getting upset over someone (a 20 year old female) pinching his bum.

He sees humor in the story because he knows how a red-blooded boy would really behave, but "from there it got annoying [irksome, irritating, tedious] because his dad was making such a big deal out of it."

Jaraf's (m) response dismisses "Behind Times" with a long list of adjectives that are apparently chosen to communicate scorn and indignation. In his reading, the story is almost humorless—it sermonizes, insults, and condescends to contemporary young people, who (unlike the author) are worldly, knowing, and "with-it:"

I found this story immature, unrealistic, boreing, stupid, and childish. If that ever happened the guy would most likely be flerting back with that girl... I think that the author is trying to tell us that any kinds of physical contact with the opposite sex before your married is bad. I also think the author is very immature, and is probably trapped in a 12 year olds body.

When Jaraf reads the story, he does not hear a deliberately tongue-in-cheek, absurd, or melodramatic fiction. Instead, he hears a reactionary diatribe warning against the evils of premarital sex and decreeing absolute chastity. Therefore, he does not imagine the author as a funny, "semi-hip" dad or a moralizing fuddy-duddy, but as a neurotic adult whose sexual development was pathologically and indefinitely arrested in prepubescence. The image of the author as a strange genetic hybrid, a misfit possessed of a grown-up mind "trapped" in the developmentally retarded body of a twelve-year-old (rather than the reverse) is a curiously contradictory one. It seems that the author's body itself, although presumably fully developed and capable of adult sexuality in reality, is the source of his anxious, puritanical, and immature rejection of sexuality rather than his mind. Like Tommy, Jaraf reads the story as a throwback to a bygone era and an antiquated sexual code but his response strikes me as even more impatient than Tommy's with people who refuse to change with the times:

> *To me that's the way it was back in 1801, the times have changed, grow up, don't cry over a pinch in the behind. Again it was immature and lousy... All I have to say is it's the 90's grow up, get a life. Live with it don't be a little kid. If you don't like it fine avoid it, but don't cry, and make a scene. I also think that the author was raised in a church by nuns and is 12 years of age.*

He seems to be speaking directly to a general audience that includes, but is not limited to, myself, the classroom teacher and the author, along with all the prudish, small-minded people around him who create a fuss around harmless incidents such as the one described in the story. The number and the exaggerated language of Jaraf's mocking admonitions ("grow up, don't cry over a pinch in the behind, get a life, live with it, don't be a little kid, if you don't like it fine avoid it, but don't cry, and make a scene") contribute to a sense of anxiety and bravado around a sensitive topic and approach the kind of hysterical overstatement that he finds so distasteful and unsophisticated in the text.

The *Gap* Generation: Never trust anyone over eighteen.

Jaraf's remarks illustrate an attitude, which he shares with several students, that in the generation wars, an adult who crosses enemy lines and presumes an unwarranted familiarity with adolescent customs, styles, and slang becomes an easy target for ridicule. Alyssa, Jacqueline, and Tommy all seem to have received the text as an example of

antiquated and irrelevant adult nonsense and proof that the author is out of touch with young people's lives. All three appear anxious to conceal any chinks in a carefully cultivated "chill" image and to deflect any suspicion that a modern, blasé woman/man-of-the-world might worry about sexual harassment:

> *I liked how they put it together except they should use words we say today like a girl who grabbed/pinched his butt and she was called an assaulter. How old is this story or in what time range.* **[Alyssa (f)]**
>
> *Well I guess that it was enjoyable but it too much of the old style words that nowadays we think are stupid.* **[Jacqueline (f)]**
>
> *These are the 90's, and sexual advances isn't something you can hide from. I disagree with the author's point of view because these are the 90's live with it... If you cannot live with the way society is changing I guess that you will be a loner because you will never go out.* **[Tommy (m)]**

All three characterize "Behind Times" as entertaining but hopelessly outmoded, drawing attention to its inappropriate vocabulary and antiquated thinking. Phrases such as "disco," "The Bump," and Barry Manilow seem, in Alyssa's reading, to represent irritating attempts by adults in general (not just the author) to sound "with it," but that succeed only in demonstrating how pathetically and irredeemably un-cool these adults really are. Her response forges an emotional and logical link between a casual pinch on the dance floor and "all the way" sexual activity and suggests that the story trivializes a serious problem:

> *[The story] was funny and you got the point that you got to be careful because something else may happen. How at this certian age people may get sexual active or something along those lines.*

Her reading is premised on at least four foundational bits of knowledge: 1) adolescents "nowadays" are susceptible to fondling of a much more sexually explicit nature than the story portrays; 2) a person's buttocks are not necessarily considered "private parts" or out of bounds; 3) the rules and mores that govern the mating game and the boundaries of sexual impropriety are changing so rapidly that a fossil like the author could have little to say that would be relevant or helpful. His opinion may not be wrong, but it is based on

outdated information; and 4) a pinch on the bum implies an invitation to which the recipient may reply by abandoning his date:

> *These days you don't think that a pinch in the butt is sexual harassment, nowadays its your private parts that people may touch that you think is sexual harassment. I do not disagree with what the author's point is... Its a good thing that Stephen didn't leave the girl he was with to go with the girl who pinched his butt.*

Alyssa's reading suggests that Stephen's indignation and his refusal of the overture were not the only probable outcomes.

Aarron's (f) response echoes Alyssa's image of the dating scene in many respects. It includes the suggestion that a boy would be flattered by a come-on from an attractive woman and that he might leave with her when her signals promise that she may be more accommodating than his date. Both responses assign the power of choice to Stephen. It is not up to the girl to decide what she intends by the pinch and where or how far the encounter will go from there. Rather, it is up to Stephen to decide whether to accept her invitation or stick with his date, who is an invisible presence with no voice in the matter:

> *I found this story was funny. The one thing I liked about this story was that Stephen didn't drop his date for the chick that pinched him on the bum because some guys would drop there date and go to the chick that flirted with them. The thing I dislike is that he told his parents what happened. If it was someone else, I don't think they would tell there parent.*

Aarron's reading resists the notion that an adolescent would confide in her/his parents about such an incident. I wonder whether it would make a difference if the "someone else" were female, or if Aarron assumes that there is no sexed/gendered difference in the way adolescents and parents communicate. She insists that her own reaction to harassment would be direct and uncomplicated: "If a guy did that to me I would tell him off and to leave me alone." The story did, however, change her ideas about unwanted sexual advances. She seems to read it as an amusing anecdote with an enlightening moral that she is obliged to discover, although she isn't necessarily obliged to accept it:

I thought that it was mostly guys doing that to girls. But know I know both sex's are capable of doing that. I agree and disagree with the author because some points were true but some were totally untrue about girls.

The idea that a girl would initiate physical contact with a male stranger seems to be outside the scope of Aarron's experience.

Separate but not equal: "No gender is more sex craved than the other"

The third overriding impression that emerged was that students were decisive and unforgiving in determining whether the behaviors and attitudes depicted in the story were appropriate or not based on sex/gender. Responses to "The Little Prince" revealed a wide variety of stock attitudes and feelings about appropriate behaviors and roles for boys and girls , but they also displayed a certain degree of indecision and flexibility. This might have been true, at least in part, because "The Little Prince" was situated squarely in the realm of the fabulous and seemed remote from their day-to-day adolescent lives. "Behind Times" was a story about contemporary teens, and as such, students scrutinized it carefully for any "mistakes" in representing how girls and boys act, react, and interact.

Like some that I have previously considered, **Mustang's (f)** response concedes that the text uses humor to highlight a more serious issue. It identifies this issue as harassment of males by females, and doesn't argue with what it reads as the story's intent, which is to educate readers by making them aware that sexual harassment works both ways. The story seems to have surprised Mustang and jarred her into questioning some of her own assumptions about sex/gender. She outlines common sexist biases, and admits that she has been guilty of some of these attitudes, although the structure of this admission does hold the possibility at some distance. She stresses that "you" and "people," (not "I") normally imagine that all men are pigs. The reality, as Mustang sees it, is that males fall along a continuum from "pigs" (animals that possess no sexual discrimination or sensitivity and are ruled by brutish drives) to "sweet" (humans who are ruled by reason, are sensitive and considerate in their sexual conduct, and who are governed by purer desires):

It's hardly ever a guy gets mad when a girl pinches him on the bum, you would think they like that, thats how guys are usually pictured in people's minds... Its trying to get the point that males also get harassed not only

females. It shows that males have feeling to and if someone touchs them where they do not want to be touched they get offended... I thought males would not get mad if a female touches them but some males don't like people touching them even if it is a "pretty girl." ...Anyone can be a victime of sexual harassment, Female or male I agree with the authors point of view, he is trying to say some males don't like being touched by the other gender or even by the same gender. People see males as being "pigs" but some males are not and they are sweet.

Although sexual orientation is not mentioned in this text and appears to be a non-issue for most students, Mustang's response moves, without transition or pause, from heterosexual harassment to uninvited homosexual advances and interprets the text at its most literal level. It takes a rational, liberal, humanist approach, and in so doing, it illustrates one kind of "politically correct" feminist reading that turns out to be a peculiarly defensive and sexist one. It seems compelled to defend an entire gender because males are often unfairly stereotyped and denigrated and welcomes as a refreshing change the notion that males also have strong emotions and anxieties about power, control, choice, and autonomy as they relate to sexual behavior. It appears to construct a comforting/compensatory image of males as virile, good, kind, and sensitive. This fantasy is abruptly interrupted by the final paragraph in Mustang's response which detaches itself entirely from the text to express her direct and personal knowledge of another kind of man and the confusion, pain, anger and guilt their dehumanizing attentions provoke:

When you are a victim of sexual advances it makes you feel like you are not important and that person sees you as an object. When I was a victim it made me feel really guilty I don't know why but it was the worst.

I am curious whether I said something, either in introducing the text or in my questions, that would have encouraged such a serious reading of what others construed as a light, silly story. However, the distance between the first portion of Mustang's response ("I thought the story was funny and I enjoyed reading it but some parts were difficult to understand.") and the last seemed greater on my first reading than it does in retrospect.

Her first comment indicates that although she did appreciate the humor, something about the story disturbed or puzzled her and made her feel that she was missing something.

Like Mustang's, **Sunflower's (f)** reading seems almost willfully literal. It apparently detects no irony either in the situation depicted or in the author's position and quickly adopts a defensive stance. Sunflower decides that the story is "about" a female predator who molests an innocent male victim, and that the author's intent is to denounce such lawless women. Her uninflected reading makes the author's message appear unfair, since Sunflower knows that males can also be sexual aggressors and she believes that the consequences of being assaulted will be much more serious for a girl than a guy:

> *I think that the author is trying to use humour to get the person to think about a more serious issue like for example sometimes teenagers get themselfs into trouble like drugs & ~~alcho~~ ~~alcohol~~. Women are not the only ones who commit assult. I think that incidents like assults are committed by both genders... For example, if a guy would get touched by a girl it doesn't affect them in any way I don't think. But where as if a girl was assulted, the scars would stay with her for life.*

Her response suggests that the topic is a sensitive one, and that any humour in the text has been overshadowed by the anxiety and anger associated with sexual coercion. Sunflower "knows" that sexual abuse is a problem that both males and females might encounter, but she seems unwilling/unable to integrate the affective and cognitive elements of this knowledge. She is quite certain that *if* (not *when*) a male were to experience sexual harassment, it would not be traumatic in the same way it would be for a girl. The physical act itself is transformed from "getting touched" when a girl touches a guy to "assult" when the victim is a girl, and her reading seems to resist the image of Stephen as vulnerable or powerless. In Sunflower's experience/imagination, men are bigger and stronger; they are always sexually receptive and more sexually aggressive; they possess skins so thick and resilient as to be impervious to scarring; and they can and do wield sexual power in ways that damage women permanently. The reverse is apparently not a likely possibility. Her response then intimates that, at least for women, the threat/reality of violence and abuse within heterosexual relationships may be so pervasive that the

romantic fantasy of love, marriage, and children is not as universal or as easily sustained as cultural representations would suggest:

> *I think that the author made his opinion in a humorous way so that people really understand how harrassement can change their lifes... When a person goes through such an experience, it changes their perspective on marriage & having children, because that experience would be in the back of their minds.*

Ninja's (m) is one of only a few readers in this group to point out the irony that emerges when a reader mentally transposes the gender of the characters in this scene. It presumes that fathers play a powerful if indirect role in reinforcing appropriate masculine behaviors and that a father is likely to measure a son's masculinity by the number of notches on his bedpost (implicitly or explicitly, figuratively or literally):

> *I think the author is trying to use humor to show how a girl & mother might react to the situation. Like if a girl would be touched by a guy she might freak out and take it like that but a guy wouldn't. In real life a father most likely would have been proud or just bugged his son if that happened to him. He wants us to think how different males & females think about sexual advances... Actually to tell you the truth I've already thought of this type of situation before so it really didn't change my ideas. The thing that bothers me though is the fact that if a male makes a sexual advance to a girl its a big bad thing but if a female does it to a guy its no big deal.*

This reading recognizes that if a mother and daughter were to play out the same scene, it would surface some very different issues around power, fear, and the violation of a female's body, which has traditionally been represented as fragile and valuable property which must be closely guarded. It suggests that males may also feel some anxiety about aggressive sexual advances, especially if fathers imply that it is cute, cool, or flattering to be harassed by girls. Much of the slightly tentative humour in Ninja's reading derives from the fact that Stephen is not behaving like a "real guy." If a boy were to carry on like that (i.e., behave like a girl) he would be despised and rejected as "gay" or "stupid," which would be at least as bad, if not worse, than being seen as a girl:

> *The author's opinion is that guys should be able to take sexual harasement just the way girls do without it being a big weird thing. The thing that is stupid*

is that if a guy were to react like that people would think he's gay or stupid or something like that which I think is stereotypical. So, I would agree with the author's point of view.

This response points to a contradiction, which its structure then smoothes over or renders invisible, between the way it *says* girls react to harassment ("without it being a big weird thing") and the way that they "really" behave (hysterically). Ninja invokes the ideal of equality to argue that guys should be expected to take harassment with composure, just the way girls do, while at the same time, he seems to know that girls would not, in fact, react so calmly.

Allison's (f) response repeats what others have said about the changing codes around sexual behavior. She seems anxious to avoid stereotyping girls as fainthearted damsels in distress, since persons of either sex/gender can face the threat of sexual aggression:

No, it didn't (change my thinking) because its the 90's and sexual advances are something [we] cannot hide from. The story just made me think about the way things are today because today people of both sexes have to be careful when there out because of all the stuff that happens in bars and clubs today ex. "the Date rape drugs."

Her response echoes Tommy's use of the word "hide," implying that although she may have to live in an atmosphere of sexual permissiveness, she doesn't have to like it or call it exciting or liberating. Rather than concerning itself with the responsibility, guilt, or punishment of the person who commits the assault, this response stresses the need for caution on the part of the person who is molested and makes a logical leap from the nuisance of an unwelcome advance to the violence of date rape.

Juanito's (m) response is among several by males that wonder why Stephen would waste a golden opportunity. His reading seems to be rooted in a Don Juan fantasy, in which the male uses his irresistible sexuality (his weapon, his phallus) to conquer and then abandon one woman after another, reenacting and revenging his earliest and most traumatic abandonment by his mother:

I found it funny and stupid because the guy should have got with the girl. It was a sign that the girl wanted him, but he ignored it.

The following imperative, more explicit in this than in other responses, places responsibility for preventing a crime on the victim:

> *If some one is sexual harrassing you, you should have to take certain percousions [precautions] to prevent them.*

It seems to read and accept the father's advice in the text without a trace of irony—Stephen should indeed "have to" stuff his back pockets with thick hankies, both to protect his bottom and to make himself unattractive.

Marylin Manson's (m) reading takes an opposing view. He recognizes and articulates a thought that didn't appear in other responses:

> *I disagree because why was the person given all this excuse or reasons why the lady grabed his ass it makes it look that the guy forced her to grab it.*

It points to the injustice of the father's insinuations about the girl's motives and the advice he offers. This advice is typical of the kind that a girl might receive (to wear less makeup, a longer skirt, baggier jeans, or a looser sweater) and contributes to the logic by which a girl's dress and demeanor can be said to have "forced" an aggressor to violate her person. It then expresses indignation about what it takes to be existing inequalities in the treatment of male and female offenders, blinking away what many readers imagine as a likely disparity in the size and strength of a male and a female:

> *I think if a girl grabs a guys ass it's okay but what happens when a guy grabs a femalse ass. The female will drag the guy to court and charge him with sexual harrassment charges when the girl gets away scott free.*

It is not clear whether Marylin Manson intends his response to say that it is okay for a girl to grab a guys ass or that the courts would rule in her favor. In either case, the implied harm in this reading is not the physical or psychological harm resulting from the incident itself but the threat of a lawsuit after the event.

Mercedes' (f) response conveys amusement at the ridiculous notion that Stephen (or anybody) would take exception to the girl's behavior, which seems to her entirely normal and acceptable, and at the disparity between the fictional reaction to such behavior and the way a boy or girl would "really" behave:

> *I found this story funny because he [Stephen? The author?] acted as if it was wrong to do something like that as if the girl was crazy. I also found it silly*

that he would go and ask his father for advise instead of his best friend. I liked the part in the story when they were giving him advise on how to take percautions and safety for example wearing baggier pants and a handkerchief in his back pocket.

Like Jaraf, Mercedes reads the story as a warning against premarital sex—more particularly, casual premarital sex, and as an attempt by the author to "cover" (effect completion or closure; guard against danger or attack; conceal from view; invest with a false outward appearance; obscure an underlying true character) the issue of sexual harassment:

I think he is trying to use this story to cover an important issue. For example taking sex more seriously and waiting until you are married. Or if you are with someone it should be someone you are close to, not a perfect stranger.

However, she does not take offense to this moralistic stance in the way that Jaraf did, possibly because she sees some room for disregarding this prohibition when two responsible people care for each other. Her choice of the word "perfect" to describe an absolute or total stranger complicates her literal message. The switch from the first person to the second person when her response deals directly with sex suggests that a certain degree of anxiety is attached to the topic. Mercedes' discussion of the text's portrayal of gender roles makes a startling and what might appear to be an unmediated transition from a pinch on the behind to rape, and from there to rape with violence:

It made me realize that guys are not the only ones who take advantage of a situation. That it can go both ways. Since you always here of a guy raping a girl, but you never hear about a girl beating or raping a guy... You shouldn't get into anything you don't want to or you are not ready for.

Mercedes' reading finds the situation funny on one level, but it also creates anxiety and discomfort on another. The last two points in her response reveal some interesting contradictions. In the first three sentences, Mercedes underscores the threat of force and the potential for violence in a sexual encounter. She recognizes rape and the use of force as a fact, but she then softens the harsh picture she has painted by emphasizing that a person has a responsibility to choose and control the nature and the degree of involvement.

I thought the story was funny, I enjoyed it... I thought [the author] was using humor to get past the real (serious) issue about women and men nowadays. I think he wants us to think about the real issue that's happening instead of the humor behind it.

Miguel's (m) response melds the two words "funny" (comical, humorous, peculiar, perplexing) and "silly" (giddy, foolish, ridiculous, meaningless) apparently to characterize not just the story, but the strange, crazy, absurd times we live in. He does not agree that the author intended to be provocative, but he does believe that a wise reader will "push it"—that is, that s/he will work to extract and profit from the story's hidden moral:

I thought the story was funny and silly. Of course this is the 90's a lot of things are funny and silly... I think the author is just trying to be funny. But it would be a good idea to try and push it to a more serious issue.

The text's reversal of gender roles seems to take Miguel by surprise, unsettle him, and make him curious. It seems to render his own previously unexamined attitudes "strange" (unusual, foreign, alien) by encouraging him to view them from an unfamiliar perspective:

Well this does seem kind of strange that I wouldn't mind if a girl pinched me (but there is a line) but what would the girl react like if I did the same to her and she was in the exact same position as me.

Curtis' (m) response also links the adjectives funny and silly, but his indicates more hesitation and ambivalence than Miguel's does. His comments reveal some uncertainty around the choice of adjectives and their correct order. The one modifier that does come to mind and which the author does not use causes some difficulty, so that Curtis attempts to take back, by striking out, both the offending word and the danger it implies:

I found the story kind of funny and ~~danger~~ silly. I found it ~~silly beca~~ funny because it talks about getting pinched on the bum while danceing to disco. I found it silly because it have to do with dances back in the fifties when disco was popular.

Adrian (f) says "I thought it was funny because it wouldn't really happen that way," suggesting that the humor in the story arises from its description of an incident that is

Adrian's (f) response expresses surprise at Stephen's decidedly "strange" reaction. Her reading seems to grow out of an image that appears in many responses by both males and females of a virile young man who is unflappable, grown-up, and independent. He is also perpetually ready and eager to grasp any sexual opportunity that presents itself, no matter how anonymous or unsolicited:

> *I think first of all that if a woman pinched a guys bum nowadays they would enjoy it. I thought it was funny because it wouldn't really happen that way. If it did happen a guy would be thrilled & not worry about it & definitely wouldn't bother telling his parents. I would think that it would be a guy doing it to a girl instead... It was funny when he reacted in such a strange manner, no guy would ever worry & tell their parents.*

Her response mentions that, in actuality, the scenario would more likely involve reversing the genders of the pursuer and the pursued, but doesn't indicate that this is a deliberate strategy employed by the author. It reifies the idea that the recipient of an unwanted advance may not have monitored his/her own actions carefully enough, and may be sending out, either consciously or unconsciously, provocative signals or "vibes" that invite these advances:

> *I think [harassment by] a male to a female is more common. It is an important thing to think about because if you give the wrong impression they [boys? people in general?] may think you want something that you don't... Men don't worry about it to much but I think they should.*

My prompt for this response asks whether the reader can tell what the author's opinion about sexual harassment is. Adrian's reading, as does Monica's, imagines the author as female, despite several references identifying the speaker as Stephen's father and the author's masculine name (Gary), which suggests that the voice in the text sounds like a woman's to her:

> *Her opinion is to watch out & it could happen anywhere even at a dance hall. She is right that you should be careful.*

Although the text focuses on a boy's experience and Adrian doesn't explicitly identify an ironic tone or subtext, her reading does seem to imagine the problem presented in the story as a uniquely female one:

If you get into a situation of unwanted sexual advances happens to you tell someone or don't do anything to give them the wrong idea because you may get yourself into something you may not be able to get out of.

A girl who finds herself in such a situation should: 1) tell somebody who has more power and authority (presumably a male or an adult) rather than try to handle the problem herself; 2) be careful not to do *anything* [even if she has no idea what specific behaviors this might cover] that may give *them* [again, any boy, or any person—she may not know who is monitoring and evaluating her conduct] the wrong idea; and 3) accept that even given the above, she may find herself victimized and helpless.

Curtis' (m) reading finds the portrayal of Stephen's parents' reaction sufficiently atypical or unexpected to make it funny. It hints that the parents' concern, so shameful that they cannot allow even the *thought* to crystallize, might be the suspicion that their son has in some way provoked the incident ("asked for it") by sending out extrasensory signals (similar to the ones that Adrian describes in her response) that advertise his availability and/or promiscuity:

I also found it funny on the way his parents took to the news. They tried to make up reasons why a girl would do that just because they didn't want to think the truth... Why would anybody really get mad with a good looking girl/boy pinches you in the but. Whats so bad about that. You would think its the boys would do that more than females... Why would anybody complain about a good looking girl pinching your ass? Nowadays people find it complenting when attractive people touch them, or pinch there buts. That means they like you, or that they think you have a nice but.

Curtis offers the observation that "you" (the reader, people in general) would expect boys to be more sexually aggressive than girls in a matter-of-fact manner that de-emphasizes its significance. He offers this statement as a simple fact, not to suggest that the author makes use of this knowledge to build a funny story by pretending that he and the reader don't share this secret. He constructs an image of sexually confident "people" (male and female?) who take a pinch on the behind as a complement. He refers to, and then directly addresses, these people in the second and third person as "them" and "you," but he does not use the first person (singular or plural) to include himself among these people.

A curious contradiction appears in **Cosmo's (m)** response. It describes the young woman's overture—a pinch and a grin—and the young woman herself, as ferocious (fierce, vicious, mad with rage, bloodthirsty, menacing). At the same time, it indicates that Cosmo imagines that his own reaction would have been much less dramatic than Stephen's:

> *I knew that women were getting more involved in making an advance, but I had no idea that they could be so ferocious. I wouldn't have ~~like~~ made such a big deal about it.*

After reading "Behind Times" Cosmo concludes that "The author isn't for any sexual harassment, whether it happens to men or women." To this unoriginal, bland, and somewhat obvious platitude he adds a thought that to my ear does sound original, authentic, and slightly wistful: "I agree because everyone has their own dignity if someone harasses you, you lose it." Cosmo's reading accepts that "most guys wouldn't mind" a pinch on the bum, but doesn't assume that the person receiving the pinch would necessarily be flattered. It recognizes that such behavior may be perceived as abusive and may compromise a person's human dignity. It then expresses dismay (whether real or assumed) about the difficulties that come to light when Cosmo attempts to adopt a historical perspective to help him make sense of a disordered world:

> *What exactly made women change from being respectful to pinching males bottoms? And why?*

It seems probable that this question serves to reduce anxiety by discouraging, concealing, negating, or diverting attention from a more critical consideration of the situation in the past as Cosmo remembers or imagines it. It focuses instead on a nostalgic longing for "the good old days" when men made the advances and women received them respectfully, whether they accepted or spurned them. The story appears to create some discomfort and resistance in Cosmo by challenging his comfortable view of a stable, orderly world with predictable gender relations.

Viper's (m) reading again calls up a familiar image of masculinity which says that Stephen's reaction is unusual and inappropriate for a boy and that instead of fussing, he should relax and consider himself lucky:

I liked the fact that it showed lots of detail of where they were, like what dances they were doing and what songs they were listening to. But one thing confused me, a girl is hitting on him and he's complaining? Like its such a bad thing.

I wonder if Viper's response is gender-specific, and if he would have imagined this incident as a purely flattering and non-threatening opportunity if it involved a male aggressor "hitting on" a girl. I am inclined to read his question as a facetious statement of the obvious, expressed in a way that is consistent with his reading of the humorous style and tone of the text. It seems to me that Viper is more amused by an unrealistic portrayal of a masculine reaction than truly confused about why Stephen might react that way. On a rational and literal level, viper's response accepts the story at face value:

It never changed my ideas. It just proves that no gender is more sex craved than the other.

The story "proves" that both males and females are motivated by sexual desire, and both will actively pursue sexual satisfaction. His use of the expression "sex-craved" rather than the more common "sex-crazed" is interesting—the drive to satisfy a sexual appetite becomes a natural human response to a physical craving, rather than psychologically deviant or pathological. His first response quoted above, however, indicates that he also "knows," on another less rational level and on the basis of many different kinds and sources of information and life experiences, that decisions about when, how, and with whom we act on our sexual impulses are more complex than this statement credits. He also knows that part of this complexity arises from some very real sex/gender differences in the way sexual behaviors are expressed, perceived, and controlled.

Stu Cazzo's (m) response appears to be an amalgam of amusement, surprise, interest, and pleasure. His preexisting knowledges and attitudes about sex/gender caused him to take a very different route into and through the story than most students did:

I was very surprised to hear something like that, because usually most stories are boring to hear in class. The story was funny because of the story line about a girl pinching a boys bum because usually it's the boy pinching the girls bum... girls usually don't do that they are usually shy and wait for the guy to do all the work.

In this response, what "girls usually don't do" appears to have nothing to do with assault and everything to do with shouldering a fair share of the "work" of making friendly overtures to the opposite sex. He finds the story refreshing at least in part because it allows him to imagine a world in which females are less passive and males are not solely responsible for initiating male-female relationships. This would give males an equal right to use shyness as an excuse for not doing all the work, taking all the risks, and making themselves vulnerable to rejection. In this reading, the physical contact in the story isn't aggressive or threatening. Instead, the incident is a light-hearted parody of a very familiar mating dance. It either ignores or dismisses as ridiculous both Stephen's and his father's reactions, and seems uncolored by an awareness that dating and sexual relationships can involve the possibility of physical/psychological transgression, violence, and/or abuse. This is an aspect of the narrative that more boys than girls were willing/able to overlook.

"Watch out & it could happen anywhere even at a dance hall."

Many of the students' responses that I have cited earlier illustrate what I found to be a surprising slippage between two very different readings of this text as either a humorous and clever description of a harmless flirtation or a serious consideration of sexual assault. In many cases, students seemed to vacillate, sometimes uncomfortably, between these positions. Viewed as a whole, these responses provide convincing support for the psychoanalytic view that constructing and being forced to assume a sexed/gendered identity is an extremely complex task. Psychoanalytic theories propose that this process is necessarily asymmetrical because male and female infants take up very different positions, first with respect to the mother and then in relation to the symbolic order, the law-of-the-father, and the oedipal passage. Most psychoanalytic theories agree that this process is more traumatic for a male and that a male sexed/gendered identity is inherently more fragile because it is always premised on anxiety about castration. Kareen Ror Malone is one of many theorists since Freud, including Lacan, who have reached the conclusion that for these and other reasons, a sexual relationship will always involve some degree of hostility, which may be repressed or overt.

> The sexual relationship between a man and a woman is neither complementary nor natural. Instead, sexual identity, sexual difference, and sexuality are precariously installed and are inseparable from the concept of

> castration. As defined by castration, the relationship between the sexes is weighted with loss and conflict as well as being marked by endless passion.[2]

She cites Ellie Ragland-Sullivan to support her argument that the masculine position is an uneasy one which may give rise to a variety of compensatory psychological strategies.[3] Her article continues with a detailed psychoanalytic theorization of date rape and concludes that no matter what one's ideological or political position may be or what figures one accepts as to its frequency, psychoanalytic theories are invaluable to understanding phenomenon that is very often misunderstood:

> I do not believe that one can possibly comprehend acquaintance rape in its prevalence, that is, that acquaintance rape implies that many men could be rapists, without reference to the intersection of the Symbolic Order, the real of one's body, and a resultant position within the order associated with masculinity. The key to understanding this masculinity as defined by the symbolic order is to interrogate the nature of that Order and what it gives and fails to give to the masculine subject.[4]

Malone's discussion of the origins and the mechanics of desire and fear around heterosexual attraction reaffirms my suspicion that for many students, "Behind Times" acted as a sort of psychological sponge for some of this unsettling and ambivalent affective content around sex/gender and sexuality. This affect insists on spilling over into new contexts, such as the reading of this text, which may at first glance appear to be benign. Like a sponge that can alternately "squeeze out" and reabsorb a liquid spill, a text can both call up and cathect the affect (the mess) around sexuation and sexuality. This metaphor helps me to understand the many instances in students' responses which hint that an apparently superficial reading in fact contains within it the traces of powerful emotions that cannot be rationally explained with reference to the text itself.

Students' responses to this text overwhelmingly reinforce Malone's view that sexual aggression and rape are not inexplicable aberrations but are in fact fairly predictable outcomes of a universally traumatic psychic event. This is not to say, of course, that human beings have no control over these impulses or that there are not many different ways to manage/channel/sublimate them. I hope that by this point, I have demonstrated

that psychoanalytic concepts such as the ones I have mentioned above relate directly to students' readings and to comments such as this one by Allison which I cited earlier:

> *Possibly he could be trying to tell you that men can be assulted not just women and to look out for yourself at other places... because its the 90's and sexual advances are something we cannot hide from.*

It would not be an economical use of space or the reader's time to repeat the many comments that illustrate how pertinent these ideas are. Rather, the reader may want to return, with this in mind, to almost any page in this chapter, but in particular to Mustang's, Sunflower's, Allison's, Tina-Jo's, Ninja's, Tommy's, Jaraf's, Juanito's, Marylin Manson's, Cosmo's and Viper's comments. Their responses are not only vivid examples of the strategies that human beings use to process and explain the extremes of passion and fear connected with a sexual relationship; they are also reminders that reading a text—even an unchallenging or superficial one—may help them to do so.

Conclusion

This text took students directly into the very real, immediate, and anxiety-riddled world of dating and adolescent sexuality. I was surprised at the intensity with which many of these students reacted to a story that I first read as an amusing, safe, and cliched essay that first appeared as a humor column in a daily newspaper. Students' responses to this story confirmed for me that in most classrooms, a text such as this one might be introduced to prompt a cursory discussion of the techniques of humor and journalism, but that it would not likely be used to encourage students to explore their own confused and confusing feelings about adolescent dating and sexual relationships. Just as students' comments about "The Little Prince" had done, their responses to "Behind Times" convinced me of the value of an approach that would help students to surface and examine the powerful but subliminal affective charge connected to any text that amuses, pleases, irritates, angers, or moves them. The difference between students' responses to these two texts also convinced me of the value of allowing students to determine what needs to be said about a text, and have made me much more aware that very often, the questions that an English teacher poses about a text assume that the teacher knows what aspects of the text will be important to students rather than an opportunity for students to

explore whether or how the text helps them to revise their understanding of the text, themselves, and the world around them.

Notes: Chapter Five

1 Lautens, Gary, "Behind Times," *Literary Experiences: Volume One*, Eds. John E. Oster, Margaret L. Iveson and Jill K. McClay, Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1989, pp. 303-305. See appendix 2 for the complete text of "Behind Times."

2 Kareen Ror Malone, "Sexuality and the Law: A Lacanian Examination of Date Rape," 1995, p. 671.

3 *ibid*, p. 672-3.

4 ibid, p. 673

Chapter Six: "The Griesly Wife"[1]

My Approach to the text

I introduced "The Griesly Wife" by passing out copies of the poem, reading it aloud to the students, and then asking them to respond to it in writing. For the same reasons and in the same way that I had with "Behind Times," I chose to provide them with four fairly specific questions rather than trusting them to tell me what they wanted to say:

1. What is your first reaction to this poem? Do you like it or not? Why or why not? What do you find interesting or disturbing in the poem? What particular images or words did you respond to?
2. How do you feel about the husband in the poem? About the young bride?
3. Does this poem strike you as an odd way to portray the relationship between a man and a woman, especially a newly married husband and wife?
4. Can you imagine why a poet might have imagined the fantastic events that this poem seems to be suggesting?

I was gratified and excited by the students' responses to this text, as I had been by their responses to the previous two, and immersed myself in the possibilities and the implications of what their responses did say. It was only after I had deliberately extricated myself from this initial involvement that I began to be bothered by a vague sense of guilt and loss. What the students did write for me provides rich and valuable data, but what I want to know now is what the students did not say that they might have if the poem had been introduced in a different way. Once again, my discussion of students' responses to this text will focus on the themes that emerged in students' readings and the ways in which students' responses handle these themes.

My Reading

In order to read students' responses to "The Griesly Wife," I had no choice but to employ my knowledge of violent and gruesome but, to me, relatively innocuous fairy tales like "Snow White" and "Little Red Riding Hood," as well as my familiarity with many print and Hollywood versions of traditional werewolf legends. I was intrigued by the poem's slightly skewed treatment of the conventions around mystery and horror genres and by the novelty of visualizing the action against my conception of the exotic, untamed, very masculine Australian outback, which I have gleaned almost exclusively from literature, film, and television. As I had been with "Behind Times," I was curious

about what it means to my reading and what it would mean to these students that the poem reverses the more typical scenario which features a male slasher/monster threatening a helpless female victim.

I felt an instinctive aversion to the image of an older man claiming his young wife's body as his marital property and the act of sex as his right. Although the groom assumes that his virginal, reluctant young bride will find it difficult or unpleasant, he (considerately but authoritatively) bids her to relax and submit dutifully to his attentions: "Lie still, my newly married wife/ Lie easy as you can. / You're young and ill accustomed yet/ To sleeping with a man." He addresses her with the possessive and generic title "my wife" rather than her name. My aversion is undoubtedly, at least in part, an effect of my exposure to and sympathy with feminist critiques of literature and popular culture. However, such a rational, accessible explanation, which would presumably explain a range of emotions beginning with righteous indignation, does not account for other less accessible but more powerful aspects of my response. It would undoubtedly be valuable for me to explore why/how the poem succeeds, for me, in eliciting a strong emotional response. My sympathy for the wife, who (in my reading) turns into a monster and kills her husband and my antipathy toward the husband, who innocently goes to bed with his new bride and quickly becomes her victim, are every bit as real and as strong as they are irrational.

In my reading, the poem is a marvelous distillation of some primal and atavistic male fantasies. It encapsulates the fear of arousing a voracious, insatiable female sexuality that will turn on and devour its male object; the desire to own, protect, and ultimately despoil female innocence as embodied in a woman unsullied by sexual experience; and a powerful need to negate female subjectivity. At the same time, it embodies a specifically female fantasy around empowerment and taking an aggressive stance toward male (sexual) oppression. My reading also includes a large measure of delight in the ironic justice of the husband's fate, an element that does not appear to play a part in most students' readings. All of this means simply that I cannot make sense of students' responses except to read them through my own very complex and opaque sense of what the poem "means"—although what it means to each student will be something radically different from my meaning and just as individual.

Connecting Threads

Confusion, Anxiety and (Dis)pleasure: "I find that it was disturbing because it wasn't understanding"

The first prompt that I gave them asks students to describe their initial reaction to the poem and to comment on anything that struck them as interesting or disturbing. As was the case with the previous two texts, I found that when I suggested a word, they often adopted that one, although their own choice may well have been more illuminating. Several students echoed my use of the words "interesting" and "disturbing." A key term that I did not suggest, however, but which occurred repeatedly in their responses, was the word "confusing," along with many synonymous words and phrases. Responses to this poem clearly demonstrate that a wide range of feelings may be evoked when a reader is not certain how to interpret an ambiguous text. This uncertainty may arise because the reader's text-processing skills are insufficiently developed, because there is a misfit between the reader's experience and the text, because textual clues are absent or ambiguous, or because of any number of other factors which can block the illusion that the reader has unimpeded access to a transparent, seamless reading. Almost all responses mentioned some degree of bewilderment about just what, exactly, was "going on" in the poem. In some cases, this appeared to heighten the reader's enjoyment, but it was just as often (and sometimes simultaneously) accompanied by anxiety, discomfort, and/or displeasure.

Monica (f) expresses her puzzlement bluntly and simply: "My first reaction to the poem is I don't understand it." **Stu Cazzo (m)** uses an idiomatic sentence structure which, in my view, works brilliantly to frame his ambivalent feelings about the poem, his reactions to it, and his stance as reader. He appears to be at once dissatisfied, disturbed, and pleased about what he takes to be the poem's refusal to explain itself:

> *My reaction is that I am feeling unfinished to this poem. It feels like there should be more to be explained. I like it because it left me thinking at the end. I find that it was disturbing because it wasn't understanding.*

His response turns orthodox distinctions between insensate objects and intelligent beings on their ear. It is not the poem that is unfinished (insufficiently developed) but the reader himself, while responsibility for the cognitive act of comprehension rests with the text

rather than the reader. A close look at the choices that Stu Cazzo has made to structure his thoughts can tell me a great deal when I pay attention to them rather than assuming that they have no meaning except that he needs more work in the conventions of standard usage. His comments underscore complexities of the reader-text encounter that would remain invisible if I were to adopt a widely accepted teaching strategy which recommends that I use these student "errors" as the basis for a mini-lesson on ways to avoid such transgressions in the future.

While **Cosmo (m)** indicates that he is tentatively pleased at having successfully deciphered the poem's meaning, he also admits to being uncertain about that meaning. His comments communicate a desire to replace ambiguity and uncertainty with answers and closure.

> *The first reaction I had was that it would be confusing to understand. I liked it because once I visualized it in my head I ~~saw~~ understood what it meant. I found it interesting that the man died, but there's one thing I really don't get, did the young wife die because of an animal? Or did she turn into one herself?*

Cosmo, along with many other students, seems to experience ambiguity in a text as a form of subterfuge or deceit, possibly in the same way that he might view striving to solve a mathematics problem and failing, only to be told after the fact that the object of the exercise is to appreciate that the problem has been cleverly designed to be insoluble.

Curtis' (m) response documents the personal associations that his reading draws on, the hesitation and about-face that cause him to retract his original reading, and his surprise and apparent delight when a satisfying solution to the riddle strikes him. His comments admit confusion, but it seems that Curtis is more tolerant of ambiguity in a text than Cosmo is:

> *The most interesting part was when the guy found his wife's nightgown but not her.... I responded to the whole poem. It's all about a wife ~~going outside, and getting eaten by the dingos~~ turning into the dingo. I responded to it because my family use to own a cabin and sometimes at night we here the coyotes walking around outside. But nothing were anybody turned into sometime else.... I feel confused. The man is lying in bed with his wife and she gets up and walks barefoot out the door, and he can't find her.... I know what*

happen to her she turned into one of the animals, and then she killed her husband.

Other responses communicate feelings of annoyance, frustration, and displeasure that arise when a reader is unable to fashion a reading which s/he perceives as coherent and undisturbed by gaps or inconsistencies. **Mercedes (f)** writes "I really did not enjoy this poem because it is really hard to understand and know what is going on." **Ninja (m)** is just as clear about the connection between puzzlement and dislike. His response announces feelings of anger, although it does not specify whether he is "mad" because the poem refuses to explain itself or because he is offended by the subject matter itself:

My first reaction was mad and wondering why she [the wife] did that. I don't like it because it never explained what was going on. The thing I find interesting and disturbing is thinking of all the possibilities of what happened. Maybe she was so angry that he was treating her like that that she turned into the "hunter" in a sense and hunted him like he hunted her. Also treating her like an animal she treated him like one to.

He also seems intrigued by trying to imagine what may have provoked the bride to attack her husband. One explanation that presents itself is revenge—she may be paying her husband back for hunting her and treating her "like that" ("like an animal")—but Ninja also appears to be entertaining other equally disturbing possibilities.

Alyssa (f) is careful to acknowledge in her response that although the poem doesn't appeal to her, it is not necessarily a bad one. She maintains that she doesn't like it and seems exasperated by its obscurity but her comments do show an interest in puzzling out a narrative that makes sense to her:

I kind of understand it but the way its written and the words make it confusing. I don't really like it because I only like certain poems and this isn't one of them. Its not that the poem is bad but its not something I like. The poem is interesting and disturbing because your not too sure what's going on. I don't understand the part when it said "For the track of two bare feet gave out, and a four foot track went on." That is puzzling. The way it's written means he married an animal or something on four feet. The words are rare. they aren't common today. The disturbing part is that you can't understand it.

The central incident in the story seems unremarkable to **Monica (f)**. She does not imagine herself (or would rather not appear to be) a timid, over-anxious female. Instead, she imagines herself (or wants to appear) tough and self-reliant. At the same time, she points out that this scenario would typically feature a male aggressor:

> *I found this story kind of silly because in todays nightclubs, that happens all the time and most people don't take it seriously, but I know if that happened to me I'd tell whoever to get lost before I do something about it. But his mom was kind of overeacting. But it seems like guys do it to girls.*

Her response makes Stephen's mother rather than his father the narrator, which might indicate that the narrator's reaction is more typical of a woman (a "mom") than a father. A later portion of her response states "If it was me getting unwanted sexual advances, I wouldn't want someone to take it in a funny way," a statement that contradicts the "no big deal" attitude that earlier comments convey. It seems that once she imagines herself the protagonist in such a scenario, she decides that she would not want others to treat such an incident lightly.

Miguel's (m) is another one of a small group of responses that explicitly mention that the humorous effect of the story depends on irony:

> *The author would think it was ok because he was exageratting with the guy a little. I think if the guy was a girl and the girl was a guy thats exactly how a girl would react and then I doubt the story would be funny.*

The story creates humor by upsetting expectations about the differences between the way that a girl and a guy would react in such a situation. If it depicted a guy hitting on a girl, the scene would be very close to what Miguel imagines, and so would not involve the shock of a new perception that can make us laugh:

> *Well this does seem kind of strange that I wouldn't mind if a girl pinched me (but there is a line) but what would the girl react like if I did the same to her and she was in the exact same position as me.*

The parenthetical qualification/warning "but there is a line" signals very clearly that if some imaginary line were crossed, the discussion would take a very different tack, but Miguel does not pursue this train of thought.

would like to know what happened to his wife because she disappeared out of thin air.... If a person appears out of the blue and she/he wants a relationship, if nobody knows her/him, it will be strange as you don't know what it is. Because in reality something like this is virtually impossible, as people don't turn into things when and how they want to.

Tommy apparently imagines the wife as a wraith-like spirit who appears and disappears at will. This sense that the woman possesses supernatural powers and is not what she seems to be is not confined to the people and the incident described in the poem. Rather, there seems to be a very real connection between the imagined figure of the wife in the poem and the dangers and anxieties around the contemporary dating scene, which is Tommy's reality.

In much the same way, **Miguel's (m)** response (above) begins breezily with the observation "ah, cool—an adventure." However, he too qualifies his initial enthusiasm for an uncomplicated adventure by making concessions to the demands of realism. With a nonchalance that in my view does not quite conceal an edge of anxiety, he observes:

Well things went bad because the guy wanted to make love to her but she wasn't ready so things started to get stirred up and things got way out of hand.

This response illustrates a tendency that I found more fascinating with each occurrence—when more pedestrian but possibly more distressing images threaten to disrupt a pleasurable fantasy, readers tend to adopt a language of circumlocution, understatement and cliché. In many English classrooms, superficial or vague responses of this nature are dismissed as showing a lack of serious thought and attention. They may be probed with respect to content—the writer may well be asked to extend the thought or to refine it by substituting a more precise and varied vocabulary—but not with respect to the writer's stance toward the text. This approach, while appropriate in its place and in small doses, does not help the student to interrogate a strategy that seems to me to be a fairly strenuous and purposeful psychological process that is designed to repress disturbing suggestions of conjugal sexuality, aggression, and violence.

Marylin Manson's (m) comments are unappreciative and to the point:

I don't understand the poem therefore I don't like it because it doesn't make sense. I found most of the story besides the end disturbing. I think that the husband is the victim it the story and the is staulking her pray which is her husband.

He adds that the relationship portrayed in the poem does not seem odd "because in a marriage the wife really does portray a wolf always stalking her pray." His response strikes me as both jokey and serious, highly mannered, and guarded, in much the same way that the witty, brittle dialogue in so many television comedies such as *Frazier* and *Friends* functions more to construct and protect a character's (self)image than to communicate important information—although all language, both spoken and internal, serves this function. It is impossible to determine the relative proportions of posing, straightforward commentary, good-natured humor, irony and derision in his comments. It is apparent, however, that the literal meaning of his statement carries some degree of hostility, whether the hostility is conscious or unconscious, whether it is real or feigned, and whether or not the use of humor is intended to diffuse/defuse it.

Ozzie (f) explicitly calls upon her knowledge of werewolf legends and horror films to help her read the poem, but for her, the flickering illumination of the movie screen does not apparently cast a pleasant or flattering light on the poem. Her response is similar to Marylin Manson's in that it seems to me designed (consciously, self-consciously, or unconsciously) to project a worldly-wise and jaded posture which calls too much attention to itself to be entirely convincing:

I didn't really like the poem because it seemed like a twelve year old could have written it. I'm not very fond of poems in general, though. Also, I didn't find much of it interesting. This guy's wife is some psycho beast and she ate and/or killed him. If there is some other kind of message in the story I didn't catch it. I only found it remotely interesting in the third last paragraph. It got a little intense, but not enough to make me like it. I found it really strange.... I feel bad for the husband because his bride is definately not what he expected. The bride is a mutant. If werewolves were real then I'd feel bad for her because in the event of a full moon she involuntarily transforms into a lean, mean, killing machine ... This poem strikes me as just plain odd. I can't make

any sense out of this question. This poet doesn't have much of an imagination. He seems to leave the imagining to the reader. This poem is a carbon copy of every old werewolf movie ever made.

Ozzie's reading of the poem as B-grade Hollywood kitsch evokes images of a celluloid monster which seem to prohibit feelings of empathy for the bride. The language attached to the wife is stylized, exaggerated, and rife with cliché, while the words associated with the husband are much more conversational in tone. This contradiction suggests to me that the two images are products of competing but equally powerful fantasies: the phallic bride (nightmarish, castrating, omnipotent) stands in stark contrast to the more vulnerable, human, and believable figure of the husband. In Ozzie's view, the poem is "just plain odd" while my third prompt is incomprehensible. She objects to the phrasing of the question, apparently because any answer would depend on some assumptions that her reading does not accept. I particularly appreciate responses like hers because they underline for me, yet again, how the traditional "teacherly" question-answer game can put students who are not able to be as forthright and blunt as Ozzie in the position of feeling that the very terms of the question disallow or invalidate an authentic response.

Raine's (f) response takes a similar supernatural view of the wife. It rejects the notion that the characters in the poem are people at all. Instead, it situates the narrative firmly in the realm of fantasy and dismisses it as the product of the poet's disordered imagination:

I don't think this poem portrays the relationship of newlyweds. I think that it was about a werewolf. The poet was a wierd person. He/she probably liked the contrast of a joyous event (wedding) and a tragedy (death of man)

The formal language and sentence structure of the last sentence seem to function, in much the same way that the language of Miguel's response (cited earlier) does, to soften the harsh images of a violent encounter between a bride and a groom. In this way they become more acceptable and more easily registered, as if filmed with a gauze-covered lens before being developed in the reader's conscious mind.

Sympathy for the husband: "I felt for the husband because the bride is a mutant."

While reader-response theories have been instrumental in ensuring that we will not be surprised when readers arrive at disparate interpretations of the same text, it seems to me

that these theories have not pushed us to explore what these sometimes startlingly divergent (mis)readings might reveal to an attentive reader/teacher. "The Griesly Wife" tells a story about a bride, a groom, and the strange and dramatic turn of events that disrupts their wedding night. Variations of the story that students partially reconstructed for me in their responses often appear to be only very tenuously connected to the text. They illustrate very clearly that the process by which a reader fashions a reading that meets or frustrates her/his needs is an extremely active and slippery one which is driven by forces that are mostly unconscious but nonetheless extremely powerful.

Perhaps the most striking example of this effect can be seen in the ways that readers discuss the man, his wife, and the relationship between them, as well as the other two characters who figure prominently in students' readings, the poet and the narrator of the poem. Of the twenty-two students who offered responses to this poem (11f, 11m), twelve (4f, 8m) clearly sympathize with the husband, six (5f, 1m) are clearly sympathetic to the wife, and four (2f, 2m) express either ambivalence or sympathy for both. A close look at the content of these differences highlights their significance and makes it apparent that there is more going on between the reader and the poem than we might appreciate when we are satisfied with an overly simplistic view of the meaning of reader-response theories for classroom practice. One translation of these theories that has been widely accepted and has found its way into curriculum documents and teaching strategies acknowledges that readers select from, shape, and use textual information in individual ways and then align their sympathies with one character or the other, but that the text itself does not change from one reading to the next. Advocates of this classroom approach often argue that students come to the text with very different experiences and skills, but that our job as teachers is to constantly encourage students to "back up" or validate their responses by making reference to the information provided in the text. Students' responses to this poem, and to all of the texts that I asked them to read, force me to acknowledge that although the letters on the page in front of two readers may be the same, we can make very few claims about the text that would hold for both readers.

Like many of her classmates' readings, **Jacqueline's (f)** adopts the husband's perspective and subjectivity, imagining his disappointment and anger when his wedding night confounds his expectations:

Well this poem was not easey to understand. I think maybe he thought he was going to sleep beside his new wife and something weard happened and he could not sleep bye her and his angry broke lose.

Monica's, **Honda's,** and **Marylin Manson's** responses all sympathize with the husband, and all accept that his reaction to being spurned on his wedding night would be an understandable blend of sadness, bewilderment, and frustration. In these three responses, the bride does not simply turn into a monster; she is imagined as an innocent victim, a runaway, and a predator. In **Honda's (f)** reading, she is the innocent and unwilling pawn of some malign force:

I feel bad for the husband because it's there wedding night and look what happened to his wife. I feel bad for the bride too because she have to turn into this thing on her wedding night. I think that the person who wrote this poem must have difficulty with his or her marriage.

In the narrative that **Monica (f)** constructs, the bride is an autonomous agent who casually deserts her husband:

I felt sorry for the husband, since they were newlyweds, then his bride leaves him and turns into a dingo.

Marylin Manson's (m) response is the least sympathetic of the three. It places the wife at the extreme pole of self-determination and characterizes her as a predatory killer:

I think that the husband is the victim it the story and the [wife] is staulking her pray which is her husband.

Only Honda acknowledges in her remarks that the bride's transmutation is a tragedy for her as well as for her husband.

Ninja suggests that he is having difficulty deciding how to interpret the marital relationship in the poem, but his reading seems to be based on an instinctual empathy with the husband. His comments illustrate some of the strategies that a reader may employ to smooth over the discomfort that arises when a text threatens to contradict and destabilize unconscious preconceptions:

The husband seems like he is either uncaring or just trying to make it easier for his wife the best way he knows how. I think the bride might have took him to seriously or what he said as such a bad thing. I feel the wife might be a

little crazy.... You'd think if you were newly married you would want to have sex with your husband or wife and certainly not kill them.

Ninja's response strikes me as both skeptical and ambivalent about the reading he has constructed. It begins by entertaining the notion that the husband might be uncaring, but immediately resists/negates/softens/erases that suspicion by introducing a less disturbing possibility which would ascribe a great deal of the responsibility for a nasty incident to the wife, largely based on his supposition that the husband's expectations were natural and that a bride who doesn't welcome marital relations on her wedding night must be insane.

In many cases, readers who express sympathy for the husband seem to do so less because of the wife's violence than her dishonesty. **Tommy's (m)** response represents a fairly popular point of view which assumes that the wife's intent is consciously deceitful because she decides not to warn her husband, even though she knew what was happening to her:

I feel sorry for the husband as he did not know with whom he is getting involved with. I have no simpathy for the bride as the man thought that he was marrying a legitimate wife and she had tricked him as she was not human.

Sympathy for the husband seems to preclude any similar sentiment toward the wife, especially because the bride is not human and therefore not "legitimate" (authentic, valid, sanctioned, lawful). The couple may be legally married, but a higher law decrees that not just their marriage but the bride herself is illegitimate. Like Tommy's, **Jacqueline's (f)** response points out that the bride deceives her husband, but her comments also extend an understated sympathy to the bride:

Well maybe he[the husband] was going to get married and thought of it as an unknown things you don't know about your spoues; before your life with them... Well he probable thinks I wish I would have know this before we got married. The young bride probable wishes she was normal like the rest of hummans.

Cosmo's (m) response also sympathizes with the husband and condemns the wife's secrecy. The wife is a monster who conceals her evil "real self" under the false persona of a virginal bride. However, this reading seems less convinced about the wife's

culpability and more receptive to the possibility that her feelings and motives may be innocent. It does strike Cosmo as "odd" and mystifying that a new bride would kill her husband, but it seems that she is guilty primarily of failing to disclose vital information:

> *I felt that the husband should have been told about her real self, he seemed like a concerned loving person. The wife should have told her husband about the dingo, but I don't know why she killed him. ... It did seem odd to me because she obviously loved him so why kill him? Maybe the poet had something happen to him that he could write about.*

Viper's (m) response begins by depicting the husband as aggressor rather than victim. In this reading, he is "hunting his wife," not searching for her or following her, although the word "hunting" does not appear in the poem while "searching for" and "following" are repeated several times. However, Viper does not construe the husband's motives as either concern for his wife's safety or an intent to harm her. Instead, he appears to accept that to hunt her would be the understandable reaction of a frightened man protecting himself against his wife, who poses an undefined but ominous threat:

> *It has a scary kind [of] atmosphere like he's hunting his wife as the dingoes would. What disturbed me was he was going through the snow and all of a sudden he thinks of a fire. I responded to full moon, dingoes, and where it said "For the track of 2 bare feet gave out and a four-foot track went on." ... I think the poem was weird because it talks about her turning into a dingo and I feel he will turn into one too because he slept with her. ... Maybe he was suggest watch what you're getting yourself into.*

Viper notes that he found the poem "weird." His comments carry a note of anxiety and a warning against hasty or injudicious involvements, and they also add an intriguing dimension by intimating that sexual contact might be a vehicle for the transmission of infectious diseases of the mind and spirit as well as the body.

Jaraf (m) initially insists that he has no opinion about the poem, which I take to mean that he has no emotional response. However, his comments go on to describe a reaction that is clearly stronger and more complex than simple indifference:

> *My first reaction to the poem was that the wife changed into another animal, and killed him. I don't have an opinion on this poem. I'm not sure if I like it or*

not. It's just weird. I find it interesting that where her robe lied animal tracks went farther after it. I responded to words such as griesly because at first the poem makes you think that the wife was beautiful friendly angelic. But in the end she is a savage beast with rage that kills her husband. I found it interesting.

The husband seems angry that turns to a helpless man. He seems inner afraid but outer anger. It got him in the end, and by saying that I mean he killed himself.... Probably the author was daydreaming one day, and he thought of it, and decided to make it a intriguing story. With a twist. This marriage starts and ends a little different than most I think.

Unlike readers who were initially predisposed to sympathize with the husband, Jaraf writes that he does so only after his initial image of a "beautiful, friendly, angelic" wife is rudely shattered and replaced with that of a bloodthirsty, vengeful animal. His response seems to be composed of emotions such as fascination, bewilderment, and irritation at what he seems to feel is the poem's attempt to manipulate and deceive the reader. It makes sense of the poem's references to the husband's anger, in a colorful and original assertion, by imagining it as the impotent bravado of a vulnerable and fearful man rather than simple outrage. In a cryptic comment that marks a moment in which meanings collide and sense becomes non-sense, Jaraf introduces a paradox: "It got him," while at the same time, "he killed himself," which might indicate that "it" is the wife's power over her husband's mind rather than a physical assault on his body that kills him:

Juanito's response also maintains that he is neutral toward the characters, but immediately casts suspicion on this impartial stance:

I don't have any feelings for them, I don't know them. The husband is ok and the bride is weird.

His comments describe a visceral reaction apparently composed of confusion, anxiety, frustration, and empathy for the aggrieved husband whose natural expectations on his wedding night are thwarted:

I found it kind of werid at the begging [beginning] and it didn't make sense to me. I don't like it because it makes me think too much and I don't like to think hard because it gives me headaches, and it frustrates me too.... Yes [It does

strike me as odd] because they just got married and he wanted to have sex, but then this strange thing happens. They were both waiting for this night to happen. It must be very frustrating for the husband because he wanted to have sex.

Juanito's reading assumes that both the bride and groom were anticipating the sexual release of their wedding night, but it focuses on the groom's desire and disappointment while it avoids/erases/disavows what might be an unsettling possibility—that the bride may also be a sexual being. The somatic connection between Juanito's frustration, his headaches, and his identification with the groom's distress seems obvious. Given the time, opportunity, and/or the invitation to explore and elaborate on these thoughts, his response to this poem might provide him with some valuable insights.

Sympathy for the wife: "I think he is a jerk and needs to have feelings for other people in order for them to respect him."

While many responses depend on an image of the wife as a perverse/abject/terrifying creature, just as many take a dramatically different view of her role in the poem and her relationship to her husband. **Tina-Jo's (f)** is an example of a reading that, although it does accept that the wife attacks her husband, appears to imagine her as the victim and as the protagonist rather than her husband. Her comments trace the unfolding narrative entirely from the wife's perspective and they don't minimize her actions as simply the unfocused rage of a mindless animal or as a necessary but unremarkable convention of the horror genre. Tina-Jo's reading does incorporate many elements of the horror/fantasy genre of traditional werewolf legends and their contemporary big-screen adaptations. However, it also focuses on identifying a realistic, common-sense explanation for the woman's violence as a key to understanding the poem in a way that suggests to me that while Tina-Jo may be unfamiliar with the terminology around the genre of magic realism, she is very familiar and comfortable with its techniques and the demands that it makes of a reader:

My first reaction of the poem was "What is going on here?" I also thought that since they were newly weds that maybe they were spending their first night together and she got so mad at him that she ran away and when the moon hit her she turned into a werewolf and the nightgown was either two small or two big, and fell off her. Then maybe she got so mad at him and

attacked him because of all the wrong he has done to ~~him~~ her. ...I think he is a jerk and needs to have feelings for other people in order for them to respect him. The young bride seems to be nice but when it comes to taking the name calling she dose not accept it so she takes off and gives him what he deserves. ... Maybe the poet dose not like the disrespect that the man had for the wife so he made the wife turn on the husband.

By repeating the phrase "she got so mad at him," Tina-Jo highlights its significance and calls attention to the wife's motivation and feelings rather than her actions. The husband is insensitive, sexually aggressive, and impatient, which seems to justify, or at least explain, his death. Tina-Jo's reading appears to accept the husband's guilt ("all the wrong he has done to her") as an obvious and indisputable fact rather than identifying it as a supposition, an argument, or an opinion. At the same time, she complicates what might at first seem to be a realistic reading by drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of the choices that an author makes.

Mercedes (f), **Stu Cazzo (m)**, and **Aarron (f)** express similar sentiments about the couple and all three justify the wife's behavior as a reaction to her husband's cruelty. Mercedes comments are succinct and matter-of-fact, and they make no reference to the supernatural elements that other readers fastened on:

I feel the husband is cruel and has no feelings toward his wife. The bride got back at her husband for being mean and cruel.

While **Stu Cazzo (m)** apparently shares this view, accepting that the wife's violence stems from her anger at being rejected and humiliated, he is just as matter-of-fact about the wife's horrible metamorphosis:

I feel that he does not love his wife because he calls her griesly and that is insulting his wife. I think the young bride turned into a dingo and killed her husband maybe revenge for all the name calling.

Aarron (f) is even clearer about where her sympathies lie and vehement in her objection to the husband's behavior. In response to the prompt asking how she feels about the two character, she writes:

That he is acting so immature because he shouldn't be calling his bride names and being so rude to her and treating her like an animal. She is okay but the

thing I don't understand is when her husband was calling her names and treating her like an animal that why she didn't slap him or more and call him names and like I said before slap him to knock some sense into him.

It might reasonably be argued that Aaron's (mis)reading of the line in the poem that reads "still he called her name" causes her to overreact and to advise countering rude, immature (name-calling) behavior with violence. It might also, however (and, I think, more profitably) be argued that preexisting knowledges, experiences, and associations cause her to build a scenario of abuse, resistance, and revenge on the basis of objectively neutral or innocent textual clues. Some, such as **Raines' (f)**, express sympathy for both parties: "I felt that the husband was scared for his wife and he didn't know what was going on. I felt sorry for the bride because it wasn't her fault."

Marriage: "When a couples get married they don't call each others names"

As the comments above illustrate, responses often focus on arguing a case for the culpability of one character or the other. At the same time, however, these comments indicate that most students are sitting uneasily on the lid of a Pandora's box of fantasies, fears, and desires around dating, marriage, and sexual activity. Responses such as the ones below presume that marriage implies a level of mutual respect, trust and self-sacrifice, although they disagree about the extent to which the poem clashed with this preexisting image and the places where it does so. The tenor of comments by **Doc (m)**, **Cosmo (m)**, and **Tina-Jo (f)** contrasts markedly with the cool, ironic detachment evident in others such as Ozzie's and Marylin Manson's. In contrast to many of the responses cited previously, **Doc (m)** insists that the couple are in love and that they have each other's welfare at heart:

He loves his wife. If he didn't he would not have gone to go look for her. She loves him because she tried to spare him the fact that she is a weredingo.... No [the poem does not portray marriage in an odd way because] if you think of it she loves him so she spares him.

Cosmo (m) also feels that the couple's love for one another is not in question, which causes him to look for another reason that would cause the poet to tell such a strange story—he must have had something extraordinary happen to him.

It did seem odd to me because she obviously loved him so why kill him? Maybe the poet had something happen to him that he could write about.

Tina-Jo (f) goes even further in explaining that the marriage in the poem is decidedly atypical by contrasting it to what she feels "usually" happens in a marriage:

Yes [this is an odd way to portray a marriage] because usually you have an open relationship and respect each other for who you are and what you have or have not done in the past.

Mercedes (f) appears to share this somewhat utopian view of marriage, but her response is more blunt about the probability that a marriage not founded on romantic ideals of mutual love and respect will fail. It makes only an oblique, almost Victorian reference to the difficulty of negotiating the physical aspects of their relationship:

My first reaction is a newly wed couple and she is still not use to sleeping with someone by her side.... It sounds as if they never should have been married in the first place if he was going to treat her that way. This poem seems to be suggesting sex and how she was nervous and he couldn't handle it.

Monica's (f) comments about marriage, the characters, and the events of the poem as she imagines them are enigmatic and intriguing. Even when viewed in the context of her response as a whole, it is not clear whether "doing that" refers to committing a violent murder, coercing a reluctant partner to have sex, both, or something else entirely:

I couldn't imagine a newlywed bride doing that. I could picture a groom doing that to his bride, other than that, I don't understand.

Alyssa (f) interprets the wife's wordless transformation and departure through the lens of her preconceptions about the roles of husband and wife and the balance of power in a marriage as defined by a patriarchal culture. Her comments focus on the bride's shame and her fear of rejection which cause her to conceal her malady from her fiancée:

I feel that the husband is mad because the bride walked out on him on their wedding night. I don't really understand what happened with the young bride except the moon changed her into a 4 legged animal and she ran away because she didn't want her husband to know.... It is very unusual because it doesn't happen these days. It is very odd especially on their wedding night. I

Alyssa describes the poem's unfamiliar vocabulary as "rare," and re-states in the next sentence that the words "aren't common." These adjectives, which summon up an aura of scarcity, desirability, and gentility, suggest that her reading, although uncertain, is earnest and respectful rather than disdainful or dismissive. Like Ninja, she constructs an image of a wife who is apparently more animal than human. However, in Alyssa's reading, the wife does not simply or suddenly metamorphose into an animal on her wedding night. She is already "an animal or something on four feet" when the unsuspecting groom marries her.

Although responses to "The Griesly Wife" often begin by admitting that the reader is mystified about the poem's literal meaning, most of these students willingly offered often widely divergent guesses about what it might mean and all communicated a blend of feelings which appears to be more complex than simple puzzlement. Responses such as **Miguel's (m)** articulate the pleasure to be found in engaging with the poem as pure fantasy, and the distance that this creates between himself and the characters in the drama the poem describes:

> *My first reaction to the poem was "ah, cool—an adventure." What I found interesting was that her footprints disappeared and turned into 4 feet so maybe this guy's wife turned into ~~the~~ a wolf. I think the guy figured it out, started running, and this wife started chasing him and killed him.... Well, you really can't feel too much about a person u don't know. The way I feel about the bride is a little different because the poem gives specific details about her such as her being a werewolf. I feel nothing towards both of the characters because the story is too fake. or maybe im too logical.*

His reading seems to conjure up cinematic images of supernatural horror and gruesome murder enhanced with special effects and simulated blood. Like many successful examples of this genre, it telegraphs its intent to scare while remaining broadly and reassuringly "fake." The Hollywood movies *Scream* and *Scream 2* are examples of movies that deliberately trade on the viewers appreciation of the film as a constructed work of fiction, while other genuinely creepy movies such as *The Blair Witch Project* deliberately encourage the viewer to forget that the film is a fiction.

Raine's (f) response is very similar to Miguel's. She points out that the experience of reading this text was a pleasurable one for many of the same reasons, but makes more explicit reference to the decisions that the poet made in constructing the poem:

> *My first reaction to this poem was that the words seem all scattered. I liked this poem I guess. I liked it because I liked the way that the man follows her, she turns to an animal and he becomes the prey. I think that this poem is imaginative and I liked the way the author hinted at the beginning "the moon was full" that she was a werewolf.*

Teachers very often complain that students enter a text, particularly on first reading, with a lack of awareness of the text *as text*. That is, we often characterize students as entering into the imagined world of the text at a purely visceral and unreflective level of engagement. It is often argued that movies, television, and video games have had the effect, particularly with respect to violent texts, of exaggerating this tendency. Student responses to this text and the others that I looked at point to the mythical nature of these assumptions about students and their reading habits. It seems to me that their familiarity with a wide array of fictional forms (movies, television, music videos, video games) has caused them, on the whole, to become more rather than less aware that a fictional text is a world created by an author and that a reader must always decide (and decide again, with each re-reading) whether to be co-opted into this world or to resist it.

Tommy's (m) response acknowledges his appreciation of the poem's undemanding, comic-book enticements, but then proceeds to extend, deepen, and subvert such a one-dimensional narrative. It appears that Tommy deliberately marshals the demands of skepticism and the laws of nature to resist an easy accommodation to a simple horror fantasy. Instead, the poem seems to elicit a less dramatic uneasiness, but one which is very real and compelling in the late nineties, about the risks involved in establishing an intimate relationship when the parties have no shared history. Although the text offers no explicit information about how well the bride and groom knew each other before their marriage, it seems that an assumption that they were not well-acquainted helps Tommy to understand what happened:

> *I sort of liked this poem because of the choice of words used but also that his wife disappeared when he put his jacket on. What I found disturbing is I*

"button down" something that is, by definition, an absence. That is, language functions to foreclose a wide range of possible meanings and to foster an illusion that the speaker/writer and the listener/reader can have access to the same meaning. Rather than attempting to use language to distil and explicate one unambiguous meaning, it seems to me that these readers often strive for an opposite effect—that is, they choose words for their ability to contain and explode a multiplicity of ideas, images and associations.

Conclusion

As with every text we looked at, students' responses to this poem resist my efforts to formulate abstractions and generalizations about the characteristics that differentiate male from female readers. Psychoanalytic theorists such as Nancy Chodorow who work from an Object Relations perspective posit that boys and girls are forced to take up very different positions with respect to the mother, the father, and the Oedipal passage.[3] (See chapter 1.) These theorists argue that in order for a female to grow up as a woman, she must identify with the mother's female qualities. As a result, this process encourages the development of empathy and other psychological attributes that enable the formation and maintenance of strong interpersonal relationships. The male infant, on the other hand, constructs a masculine identity in opposition to the mother. This process requires that he view the world not in terms of strengthening and expanding these primary empathic and relational capacities but in terms of striving toward separation and independence.

Object-Relations theorists argue that these processes require the development of different psychological aptitudes, which means that girls and boys develop very differently as readers.[4] One difference that these theorists point to is that boys are more likely to engage with a story at the level of action and adventure, while girls are more apt to read with a sensitivity to the psychological life and the relationships among the characters in a story.[5] I have not found this to be the case with students' responses to this or any of the texts I asked them to read. There seem to me (from this admittedly very small sample of readers and readings) to be significant differences in the way that readers responded to the action, the violence, the characters, and the relationship as they imagined them, but these differences do not line up neatly on the basis of sex/gender in support of the claims made by writers who view English language arts classrooms with the help of Object Relations theories.

Chapter Seven: "Medea the Sorceress"

My Approach to the Text:

I introduced "Medea the Sorceress" by Diane Wakoski, in the same manner as I had "The Little Prince," by reading it aloud to students before giving them copies of the poem broken up into six sections of five to sixteen lines each, interspersed with generous portions of lined white space for writing. I then read it aloud again, pausing after each section and allowing as much time for written responses as students seemed to need. As with "The Little Prince," students needed no prompting beyond a request to write down any thoughts, questions, or reactions that came to mind. Most wrote busily and apparently enthusiastically. At some points, we continued only after I assured those who were still writing that we would allow some time at a later date for them to add anything they still wanted to say. On the whole, this selection evoked strong reactions and raised troublesome questions for most students. Their responses demonstrate that each reading is an idiosyncratic, shape-shifting blend of cultural, familial, interpersonal, and intrapsychic influences.

My Reading

"Medea the Sorceress" is a poem which alternates between a first and third person point of view of a pregnant young woman in "the Home for unwed mothers in Pasadena" who has apparently been rejected and abandoned by her boyfriend and her family. It blends social realism with fantastic and mythological elements, interweaving the identity and the experiences of the persona in the poem with that of Medea, the mythological sorceress who aided Jason in his quest for the golden fleece and who then returned with him to Greece and became his queen. Ten years later, Jason cast Medea out in favor of a new wife. In revenge, Medea slew their two children and made her escape in a chariot pulled through the air by winged dragons. The poem plays with the chronology of the events that it narrates, providing little explicit evidence to help a reader determine which events belong in the past and which in the present.

As I read it, the poem makes expert use of the figure of the betrayed and enraged sorceress to transform what I might otherwise read as a cliched and dated example of a

1970's feminist polemic (although the issues that it raises are important and legitimate) into a poem that I find arresting, memorable, and aesthetically satisfying. I thoroughly enjoyed the effect of allowing different sets of conventions around several very different genres (realistic narrative, social commentary, myth, fantasy, horror) to play off/with/against each other. This is an aspect of the poem that created a significant, sometimes insurmountable, barrier for some student, rather than adding to a pleasurable reading experience as it did for me.

I was an adolescent in the 1960's, my mother was a devout Roman Catholic, and I attended an all-girls' high school where most of my teachers were nuns who seemed to enjoy belaboring stories about female saints who chose to die rather than to lose their virginity. Consequently, I was subject to what I consider to be a particularly repressive and hypocritical brand of 1950's morality. In the two communities in which I was raised, to have a daughter who became pregnant was one of the worst shames that could visit a family, along with other scandalous character defects such as alcoholism, poverty, and mental illness. A family touched by any one of these problems would almost certainly fall to the bottom rung of the social ladder. These biographical facts mean that, although the students in this class were attending a Catholic high school and many come from families with strong ties to Catholicism, references to a home for unwed mothers and the fear, guilt and shame around teen sex and pregnancy were very real and evocative for me in a way that they probably were not for adolescents growing up in the late 1990's.

Individual Students' Readings

Twenty-one students (13 f, 8m) of the twenty-seven who consented to participate in my study were present when I introduced "Medea the Sorceress" and all of these wrote and submitted responses. In examining responses to this text, I want to focus almost exclusively on individual students' readings rather than attempting to synthesize or homogenize their responses in any way. It seems to me that the value of psychoanalytic theories in the language arts classroom lies in helping teachers to spot the places where we could encourage a student to interrogate the interpretation they have (provisionally) constructed, to take responsibility for it, and perhaps to revise and extend it. I hope to demonstrate in this chapter how important and how difficult it is to read these responses

and to stay attuned to both what is universal and abstract and what is unique and concrete about them. I will examine first the girls' responses and then the boys'.

Mustang (f)

Mustang's response espouses her conviction that having sex and getting pregnant are not synonymous with either being in love or with failing. Rather, motherhood can be viewed as a positive accomplishment, even though the baby's father may not return the girl's love and may sever all ties with the girl and her baby. Nor does she accept that an extramarital pregnancy makes the young mother in the poem "bad."

> *Why has she **FAILED** and why is it written like that in **BOLD** letters? Who is "J," why does she say his name? Did she get pregnant because she was in love with this guy J?*

Her response then offers a tentative but provocative explanation for the girl's pregnancy which suggests that to call it "unplanned" or accidental may be to misrepresent the extent to which it is a consequence of the girl's own desires and intentions, whether or not she consciously recognizes them as such:

> *Why would people think she was bad just because she got pregnant, maybe she wanted to prove a point. How did she give up her child, did she kill it or what?*

The pregnancy may have happened because the girl "wanted to prove a point," which raises a question for me about the point that Mustang imagines the teen wants to make. Does the girl want to prove that she is a woman, not a child? Does she want to assert her independence from her parents? To establish that her sexuality is nobody's business but her own? To prove that she is desirable/lovable? The logic of the second sentence depends on forging a linguistic association between giving up her child and killing "it." The addendum "or what" opens up the response and creates a space for alternative scenarios around the murder/disposal/abandonment/forfeiture of an infant that the mother will not or cannot raise.

> *I don't like when she said life will go on like it always has, I mean she gave up her child that's a big step, life will never be the same! If she ~~would~~ won't talk about her mistakes then she must regret it or feel bad.*

Mustang's comments react to the line in the poem which states "she believes her life will go on, the same as it has always gone on" with disapproval and disagreement rather than puzzlement, presumably because Mustang is certain that giving up a child could not be an insignificant incident, no matter how she handles it. A pregnancy may be a mistake and a source of regret but it will definitely alter her life irrevocably. The teenage mother's refusal to talk about her decision is taken as evidence of her sorrow and her guilt.

> *Why does she compare being pregnant to a desert? Maybe where she lives or at that time, whoever gets pregnant (who are not married) will be punished.*

In Mustang's reading, it is not the home or its natural surroundings that are associated with or compared to a desert but the physical, emotional, and psychological condition of being young, unmarried, and pregnant. Mustang adopts the metaphor quite naturally, while at the same time she attempts to disavow the metaphorical connections that she must have made when constructing her reading of the poem. Her response then grapples with the notion that sexual activity and/or pregnancy outside of marriage merits punishment. It takes issue (using the present tense) with the (continuing) cultural practice of blaming and punishing only the pregnant girl:

> *The question that is bothering me is why don't the men get punished too, it takes two to have sex. Like for example. She got pregnant and got sent away to be punished and he guy friend that helped her did not get punished he went to a prep school!*

Mustang's comments position the idea of "punishment" for a pre-marital pregnancy as both relevant and irrelevant to her own time/geographic location/culture/family. They confirm, while at the same time they deny and protest, her knowledge that, for a girl, to be in such a condition would cause a great deal of shame and guilt. At the same time, however, she clearly reads the girl's presence in the home as rejection by her parents (she is "sent away") and as a punishment (unlike, for example, being sent away to a hospital in another city for specialized medical treatment of any other kind). Mustang does not state here, as she did earlier, that she doesn't "like" the fact that the girl is punished, or even question why she is punished. She appears to accept that it must be inevitable or appropriate, at least within the context of the poem. Her question is, rather, why "the men" (not J specifically, but men in general) are not also punished. She is acutely aware

of a sexual double standard, but she reads the act of becoming pregnant as a matter of consent. J did not take advantage of his girlfriend, he "helped" her to get pregnant. At first glance, the victimization implied in this reading appears to be based not on sex/gender, but on the oppression of minors by parents and other adults. The next section of Mustang's response, however, articulates her fury at the image of an irresponsible aggressor who got the girl pregnant and left her to suffer the consequences:

> *See he was not punished so now he is dating girls, un-pregnant girls! He did not learn, he had no responsibility that's why! I mean that makes me mad, he got this girl pregnant, and she was the one that has to go through all the pain and do this on her own. And he doesn't care, he is off dating other girls and what if he gets them pregnant! I understand why she would kill him (just joking) it just makes me mad.*
>
> *I believe thats true when some men get girls pregnant they do not take cure of the ~~responsibility~~ little child they created!*

She imputes to J's actions a callous disregard for his girlfriend's situation, and concludes that he has learned nothing ("boys just don't get it") and is likely to repeat this behavior. She doesn't appear to consider alternative scenarios that would make him less culpable. At this point, Mustang (cautiously) generalizes J's behavior to (some) other men. After some thought, the man's depersonalized "responsibility" is replaced by an image of "the little child they created."

Alyssa (f)

Although the text provides no specific details about the unwed mother's age or family, except to call her a girl, Alyssa assumes that she has been sent to the home by her parents:

> *Why did her parents keep her at home? I think it would be cruel to send your daughter away for a mistake she did?*

Both the omission (misprint or mis[sed]reading?) that confuses Alyssa's first question (indicating that the girl's parents did *not* send her away) and the contradiction between the declarative construction and the question mark at the end of the second sentence indicate some uncertainty. The two question marks indicate that Alyssa is puzzled, rather than simply indignant or angry, about what some students interpret as straightforward

cruelty. She picks up and repeats the word "mistake" and ignores the word "bad" in connection with the unmarried but pregnant girls.

Alyssa translates the social worker's insensitivity into a general rule: it is "mean" for any person to tell another person, not just the girl in the poem, that they have failed. She understands this because she knows how she would feel if she were in the same position:

> *It's mean to tell a person they failed at something. I don't talk about my mistakes because I don't want to regret what I have done, maybe she feels the same way.*
>
> *(Did she have an abortion?)*
>
> *Do they lock the girls up?*

In her abrupt transition from the poem to her own mistakes, Alyssa indicates that her choice of "a person" and the indefinite pronoun "they" may not be simply an arbitrary or careless construction. Her response foregrounds concerns about mistakes and regrets, while brackets around the question about a possible abortion might be a way of "bracketing" (fencing off, keeping in, or keeping out; implying connection or equality of; linking or coupling by means of a brace; enclosing in brackets as parenthetic or spurious) some anxiety around this issue. It poses a question that not only asks whether the girls are free to leave but, in doing so, suggests a concrete image of metal bars and uniformed guards with large clumps of keys on their belts.

Alyssa refers to the lines describing the situations that have caused the girls to become pregnant as "discusting," ("6th line, 5th & 4th are discusting") a word which suggests that her reaction (repugnance, aversion, repulsion, queasiness, anxiety?) to images of rape, incest, and promiscuity called up by the poem is as much physical as it is cerebral. Her response, after only a very cursory and elliptical reference to these lines (whether because of naïveté, prudery, religious beliefs, first-hand and possibly painful associations with one or some of the behaviors mentioned, or something else entirely) quickly turns its attention to the question of the pregnant girls' loss of freedom with a statement that is at once an assertion and a question: "I think they would feel trapped. Was it their decision to go to this place? Or was it their parents?" At this point, Alyssa seems to be questioning one of the assumptions that she brought to her reading, asking a

question about agency and possibly querying her initial willingness to bring pre-fabricated images of the pregnant young girls as powerless victims to her reading.

The next section of this response begins with a threadbare platitude, but Alyssa seems to recognize almost immediately that the words she has just written would ring hollow in certain circumstances:

> *All people make mistakes, just put it in the past. But some of these I wouldn't want to forget, cause either way I think they would haunt you.*

She knows, possibly intuitively, that denial and repression are unreliable, unsatisfactory, and probably pathogenic. The kind of mistake that she would like to forget, but knows that she could not and would not, is not just any mistake. It appears to be associated, by way of the word "haunt," with the image of a dead person—such as, for example, an aborted fetus. Slavoj Zizek argues that the fantasy of the "undead"—a ghostly reincarnation of somebody who will not stay dead—is an insistently recurring presence in movies and other popular culture media because of the way that language functions to shape human psychology:

> *The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid debt.... It is commonplace to state that symbolization as such equates to symbolic murder: when we speak about a thing, we suspend, place in parentheses, its reality. It is precisely for this reason that the funeral rite exemplifies symbolization at its purest: through it, the dead are inscribed in the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will "continue to live" in the memory of the community.*[1]

Zizek's discussion helps me to understand that Alyssa's reference to being haunted by one's mistakes is so abstract and metaphorical as to be almost devoid of meaning, but at the same time it is also absolutely concrete and literal.

There are only two further observations that Alyssa feels she can make with any confidence about the poem. 1) She knows that J shouldn't be bragging about his new conquests to his pregnant girlfriend, and 2) she knows that killing (killing J? killing the baby? somebody else?) is always wrong:

He shouldn't be writing what other girls he goes out with. He's just trying to make her jealous. But killing isn't right. But the rest doesn't really make any sense to me--sorry!

Sunflower (f)

Sunflower's abbreviated response appears to be based on her understanding that girls, more often than boys, can and do attempt to satisfy a primary need for nurturance and security by constructing a fantasy in which these needs are satisfied by a sometimes inappropriate romantic relationship:

> ~~*What connection do the rattlers have to the girls.*~~ *The girls probably thought that they would be loved by their partners so called "rattlers" because they didn't have the loving environment from their families.*

Sunflower asks a question about the function of the word "rattlers" in the poem, but then strikes it out and answers it herself by linking the desert rattlers with the snakes who impregnated the girls and then disappointed and betrayed them by not returning love for sex. It seems to me that Sunflower accepts the notion that a girl can barter sex (which males need) for love (which females need). This is a notion that, however much it has been disputed, remains deeply inscribed in the habits of thinking, the practices, and the artifacts of the culture that surrounds and shapes Sunflower and her classmates.

Ozzie (f)

Ozzie's response notes approvingly that in her reading the poem creates a "head-strong" female protagonist and that it challenges a morality which defines pregnancy outside of marriage as a failure:

> *I like the way the author emphasized FAILED. That's good. I think I am impressed by her will. This chick is cool. It's nice to see a head-strong woman in a story because that is extremely rare. Girls rule!... The phrase in the brackets is good [Ozzie draws heavy brackets around the three lines beginning "girls who were all pregnant" and ending "didn't know"]. Actually it's probably one of the most truthful things I've ever read. Very well done.*

Ozzie initially admires the poem and its heroine, whom she sees as a rare phenomenon in literature, a strong-willed "cool chick." However, her admiration and her willingness to

imaginatively "lean into" the poem appear to be shattered when it leaves the realm of the rational and incorporates the fantastical figure of Medea. A one-word question, which appears to be an exclamation of disbelief ("What?"), appears on a line by itself after the stanza that introduces the sorceress and her murderous revenge. The remainder of Ozzie's response appears to resist the intrusion of a revenge fantasy, instead keeping it determinedly grounded in prosaic reality and a refusal to collaborate in pathos or high drama:

> *Okay I don't like her anymore. She's a psycho. Whatever buddy you got dumped by your baby's father, move on. It happen all the time. Holy dwelling buddy.*
>
> *I suppose she's not very impressed with J then.*

I would be extremely interested to hear Ozzie elaborate on the expression "Holy dwelling buddy," for which I have no point of reference except that it must allude to the *Batman* comic books, movies, and/or television series. She concludes her comments by describing a shifting spectrum of emotions, beginning with puzzlement and moving through disbelief, admiration, surprise, and finally fatigue (mental, emotional, physical, or all three):

> *Now I'm completely confused. This girl seemed so normal at the beginning and now she's just plain weird.... Still, this story was pretty good. Nice twist of events. You wouldn't even see it coming.*
>
> *I'm tired.*

Her final words are placed by themselves a few lines below the rest of her response, presumably to indicate some thinking time, to accentuate the point, and/or to emphasize that Ozzie has just completed an intense and demanding reading experience.

Theresa (f)

Theresa's response first attempts to sort out the "facts" of the narrative by posing a long series of questions:

> *Why doesn't he call her instead of writing her? Why is she the only girl that reads poetry. Who is the girl? and the boy? ... why is she sent to a home for unwed mothers? Is that the law in Pasadena? At that time? Why isn't he with her? How old is this women? How old is he?*

Theresa appears to have little previous experience which would help her to visualize what a home for unwed mothers is, whether it was a standard legal requirement/punishment for unmarried girls who got pregnant, and why the girl would be there alone. The images that do begin to emerge from her reading of this poem carry an emotional charge of some kind, provoking what feels to me to be indignation and a desire to defend the girl. This is not to say, however, that these feelings are either simple or transparent. Rather, they appear to be decidedly ambivalent as they prosecute and defend the girl at the same time. One fact would seem to weigh heavily against an uncomplicated acceptance of the girl's position, so much so that it is discreetly enclosed in brackets, which seems here to be the written equivalent of inviting a trusted confidant to lean in closely while I whisper an unsubstantiated but troubling rumor. This is the possibility that the girl had an abortion, which would clearly introduce a moral dilemma:

> *I think that she is a strong-willed person to think that she is not bad for giving her child up. But she is not open enough to talk about her mistakes?! Why is that? (Did she have an abortion?) If not then why or what happened?*
>
> *... Why did she say that she didn't have no choice but to kill him and her children? Why her children? What did they do?... I didn't like the fact of her killing her children and her husband.*
>
> *Why doesn't she regret giving up the baby? Does she feel any pain at all?*

Theresa's response circles around and worries obviously bothersome questions about pain, guilt, and innocence (the state of being free from sin or guilt in general; moral purity; freedom from specific guilt; freedom from cunning or artifice; naïveté).

Jacqueline (f)

Jacqueline's response also circles around the question of guilt. It seems to strive for a non-judgmental tone, acknowledging that the girl's guilt or innocence is not an objective, legally or morally defined fact. It is, rather, a subjective state which depends on how she herself defines her situation:

> *Well I think that it is good that if she believes in something like 'She has done nothing bad.' Then so be it. to her she has done nothing bad, her live will move on.*

am wondering how he came up with this idea. I just think that she didn't want to tell her husband because he wouldn't marry her so she just ran off.

Some of the realities students avoided, some that they highlighted/created.

Many of the comments cited above demonstrate that when students talk about a text, the language they use to discuss it does much more than simply paraphrase the text or communicate the thoughts and feelings it evokes. Rather, it seems to me that students deliberately, if not consciously, choose words, sentences, structures, and metaphors to create, highlight, distort, or negate various "realities" offered by the text. In **Cosmo's (m)** view, in spite of the scant and ambiguous information provided in the text about the bride's feelings and actions, "she obviously loved him"—a "fact" that was not obvious at all to many readers. This may be taken to simply suggest that Cosmo needs to learn to attend more closely to the text when he reads, but it seems more plausible to me that his fantasies surrounding marriage require that he resist/disavow the image of an unloving and murderous wife.

Mercedes' (f) response represses (ignores, denies, transmutes) the suggestion of violence in the poem and the influence of werewolf legends and the fantasy/horror genre in literature and movies on her reading of this poem. Instead, she calls on the conventions of realism to help her to interpret the poem. In her reading, the relationship between husband and wife seems to be dysfunctional and abusive but almost pedestrian. The tone of Mercede's comments is matter-of-fact, reminiscent of a psychologist or marriage counselor:

> *My first reaction is a newly wed couple and she is still not use to sleeping with someone by her side.... I feel the husband is cruel and has no feelings toward his wife. The bride got back at her husband for being mean and cruel.... It sounds as if they never should have been married in the first place if he was going to treat her that way. This poem seems to be suggesting sex and how she was nervous and he couldn't handle it.*

The last sentence expresses a nebulous discomfort about the implied sexual activity and the husband's vaguely threatening behavior in the first few lines of the poem. In this reading, the wife does not attack her husband without provocation. Instead, she "got back at her husband for being mean and cruel." Mercedes seems to view the young wife's

behavior as natural and the husband's insensitivity, impatience, and inability to "handle" (deal with, manage, control, manipulate) his new bride's misgivings as pathological, rather than the reverse.

Tina-Jo (f) responds in a similar vein. She does not, cannot, will not, and/or chooses not to entertain an image of a bestial murder. Instead, she constructs a story in which the bride does attack her husband—she turns on him, and "gives him what he deserves"—but the assault is apparently bloodless and, given his mistreatment of her, reasonable and perhaps inevitable. I have cited Tina-Jo's comments earlier (pages 172-3), but it seems important to return to them in this context because they demonstrate so clearly the very deliberate and active process by which a reader ignores, selects from, and subverts the text on the page in order to construct one reading at the expense of many others.

Students' Linguistic Choices

As I read this set of responses, I was struck by a contradiction between the students' actual word choices and the kind of precise, eloquent, and elegant use of language that most English teachers encourage students to strive for in written assignments. It seemed to me that when given the chance to say whatever they wanted in whatever manner they chose, students often opted for words that might seem to be thoughtlessly chosen, overused, and unsatisfying. I wondered whether it was simply laziness—that is, avoidance of the effort required to find a word or phrase to articulate a thought more precisely—or something more complex and deliberate that caused a student to select a word or a phrase that might at best be described as cliched. When students encapsulate an affective response to the poem with an observation that the poem is "weird" or "cool," instead of trying to explain more precisely what they mean, it seems to me that they are making a deliberate and more or less conscious choice to use language in a very different way than we normally encourage and reward in schools.

Adolescents use slang as a sort of insider code to signal that they have not "sold out" to the values of parents, teachers, and schools.[2] More importantly, however, it seems to me that they also use it in an attempt to avoid doing the very thing that we tell them they should want and should strive to do—that is, to use language to articulate a thought with increasing clarity and precision. Because language always refers to something that is not present (desire), the normal progression is to use language as an attempt to narrow or

Notes: Chapter Six

1 Manifold, John, "The Griesly Wife." For the complete text of "The Griesly Wife," see appendix 3.

2 See Connie C. Eble, *Slang & Sociability: In-group Language Among College Students* (1996) as well as Felix Rodriguez Gonzalez, "Review of *Slang & Sociability: In-group Language Among College Students*," 1998.

3 See Nancy Chodorow (1979, 1989).

4 See, for example, any of the essays in *Gender Issues in the Teaching of English* (1992) edited by Nancy Mellin McCracken and Bruce C. Appleby

5 See chapters by Bruce C. Appleby ("Psychological and Sociolinguistic Bases for Gender-Sensitive Teaching") and Nancy Mellin McCracken and Bruce C. Appleby ("An Overview of Gender Issues in the Teaching of English") in the above collection of essays.

At the same time, I hear a strong suggestion that Jacqueline might not find it as easy to believe that the girl is innocent, and that she is (understandably) deluding herself:

> *Well know I think that she's just trying to make herself believe that she has done nothing wrong. And until she believes that she wouldn't be able to continue in her life.*

Jacqueline's reading takes the poem's introduction of Medea and her murderous revenge as evidence that the girl is not simply insane, but that her insanity is at least to some degree intentional or willful. This response adopts what to me sounds like a parental tone, speaking about the girl as if she were a recalcitrant child, while it also recognizes that her problems are the result of a complex interplay of social and psychological factors:

> *Well I guess this young lady has become very jelious and now taken to being crazy. There fore she would do crazy things to him and her children.... Well I think she become crazy, from all the different things that she's done and the things that happen to her. Now She just hates every one and wants everyone dead or not speaking.*

I find the last line of Jacqueline's response enigmatic and intriguing, especially the slippage from "dead" to "not speaking" and the implied forced choice between the two.

Adrian (f)

Adrian's response expresses sentiments that appear similar to Jacqueline's, but hers is more openly disapproving and more explicit about the damage that denial/repression can cause. The definition of motherhood underlying this response seems to be a social rather than a biological one. According to this definition, if the girl relinquishes her baby to adoption, she is no longer a mother.

> *Why is she still in the Home if she gave away her child. She doesn't have to be there because she isn't a mother anymore.... She won't talk about it her mistakes but she will think about it. I don't think she should act like nothing happened. I don't think her life will go on as normal because it has to be different because this will always be in her head.*
>
> *I think it is sad that the girls are in the home because ~~the~~ of the way they got there. The things that happen to them the pain they went through & the pain their going through now must be absolute torcher.*

Raped by > father

She wants revenge because he got her pregnant & now she has to live with giving up her child & he's out having fun & dating other girls. I think the last 2 lines are just her imagination. She probably said it because that is what the sorceress did & that is her favorite book.

She doesn't have the right to speak for all females because they all have different opinions and ideas about what they are trying to do. She should speak for herself.

Adrian's comments articulate a complex blend of feelings that includes a willingness to empathize with the girl's pain and anger; concern and sorrow over the grave and unavoidable consequences, both practical and psychological, of an unplanned pregnancy; a strong but generalized indignation at the injustice of her situation; a more particular discomfort around the poem's treatment of sexual abuse and incest; and a deep anger on behalf of all the damaged, pregnant young women in the home.

The feelings voiced in Adrian's response were echoed by many readers, both male and female, in different ways but with equal strength. Adrian's last statement, "She should speak for herself" is a clear illustration of a strategy that many of the young readers in my study used to deal with an explicitly feminist message, which is to reclaim and refocus an abstract political question by replying in very immediate and personal terms. It seems to me that this kind of response underlines the futility of asking younger readers to discuss a question at a prematurely high level of abstraction. The strong impulse to approach issues such as teen pregnancy by depersonalizing them and discussing them as abstractions in English classrooms is an understandable one. However, this urge must be balanced by the recognition that we do not feel a phenomenon as a problem when we consider it as an abstraction, but only when we feel its concrete effects in a specific context. Although I believe that we want our students to move in the direction of an increasing ability to theorize on the basis of specific examples provided by their own lives and in the literature they meet, this will not happen unless they are first encouraged to admit the very personal and situated "truths" of those specific examples and the responses they evoke.

Mark Bracher, drawing heavily on and extending Stanley Greenspan's work on cognitive development, argues convincingly that abstractions and generalizations, if they

are to be integrated and utilized in a meaningful way, must have a solid basis in an affective engagement with the phenomena in question:

> We acquire concepts like love, justice, and mercy, Greenspan explains, not from learning a dictionary definition or from any solely linguistic activity, but from countless interpersonal experiences and observations of interpersonal interactions, which involve affects and images that undergird and give substance to the concepts. [2]

Of course I do not argue, nor, I believe, does Bracher, that we should not ask students to develop the cognitive skills that will allow them to manage ideas and images conceptually, in the absence of tangible and immediate stimuli. We do want students to be able to formulate, articulate, and integrate into their behavior such abstract concepts as "It is wrong to harm another person for my own sexual gratification." However, if this maxim is not based in some appreciation, imagined or real, of the fear and pain that such behavior can occasion, it is unlikely that it will play a significant role in the complex web of psychic structures that determine behavior. What I do argue is that if we do not provide opportunities for some students to begin their engagement with a text at a very basic emotional level, the more sophisticated cognitive processes that we want to encourage simply will not develop.

Mercedes (f)

Mercedes' comments fasten on the pregnant teenager's turbulent emotions and draw a firm distinction between the world the girls in the home inhabit, which seems to be a fantasy or nightmare world, and the "real world:"

> *It sounds as if she doesn't want to be their. She wants to go back into the real world to be with him. She memorizes the sonnets so maybe she could stay focused and sain, because she is in the home for Unwed mothers. It also could be that she wishes her life was another way, that she didn't have her kid.*

The "real world" that this response points to seems to me to be an innocent adolescent world that includes school, dating, young love, and intimacy without the responsibilities and consequences of adult sexuality. The nostalgia that I hear in these comments also seems to involve more than a little anxiety, defiance and resentment at the psychological trauma and the injustice of being forced to recognize that this idyllic state was/is an

illusion, which may be a personal as well as an impersonal or hypothetical response to the girl's predicament. It continues in this vein, focusing almost entirely on the people and circumstances that have caused, and continue to cause, the girl to experience bitter feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, and loss:

> *The social worker is making her feel depressed by making her believe loving J is wrong, giving up her child and because wont' regret doing anything for love. They make her sound as if she is mentally unstable and not able to think for herself.*
>
> *Most of them were lost and didn't know what they were doing. It sounds as if they feel they don't belong in the home, that they did nothing wrong.*
>
> *Sounds like she feels betrayed by the person that she loves (J) and wants to get back at him by killing him. Looks as if she regrets ever getting pregnant because if it wasn't for her pregnancy she would still be with J instead of reading letters about his dates with other girls. Personally I think she should just forget about J and focus on the future.*

This other major question that this response debates concerns the origin, nature, value, and effects of psychological strength, as these qualities are manifest in repression and denial. There is an implicit understanding that to give a baby up for adoption would be inherently pathogenic and/or pathological and to attempt to deny the emotional cost of such a course of action would be to multiply the harm:

> *She feels she has to be strong, maybe so she won't face reality or the truth. She probably gave up her baby with no regrets because it probably was J's and she didn't want to have anything that reminded her of him.*

The poem's mention of Eve triggers recollection of the biblical story of Genesis, but Mercedes doesn't appear to call on the fairly common Christian associations of sin and guilt. Instead, the version of the story of the fall that Mercedes brings to her reading of the poem is one of courage, defiance, and survival which she sees mirrored in the choices that the poem's protagonist makes:

> *I think Eve represents her because she had the guts to go into the home, give up her baby and watch the person she loves betray her.... I feel this story is related to something someone might of went through quite a while back. And*

even to the story of Adam and Eve. they had the guts to eat the apple so did this person expects [except?] under different circumstances and situations.

Allison (f)

Allison's response initially fastens on the fifth line of the poem, referring to the "dusty, scrubby grounds of The Home," which she seems to accept as a negative appraisal of the home's cleanliness rather than a neutral description of its desert surroundings:

Why do they describe the grounds as so dirty.—Why are the grounds dirty at a home for unwed mothers (why not clean).

One of the points of difficulty or resistance in Allison's reading seems to be a reaction to what she hears as its negative tone. It seems that she would like to hear more about the positive aspects of the girl's belief system, but her comments also draw on Allison's implicit faith in the therapeutic value of admitting and sharing feelings of guilt and regret rather than defiantly deflecting, denying, and/or repressing these uncomfortable emotions:

I don't think she failed, she made a mistake.... Why does the author only tell us what she "doesn't regret/believe" What doesn't she say what she does believe—why doesn't she talk about her mistakes.

Where some of her classmates reacted with shock or disbelief to the lines that name rape and the abuse of male privilege as the cause of the circumstances in which the girls find themselves, Allison's seems willing/able to entertain them only in a very diffuse sense as they contribute to the poem's setting:

I think her telling us about the other girls to make us understand what it's like there.

When the poem introduces Medea and enters the realm of magical realism, the tone of Allison's response abruptly becomes much more tentative. It shifts almost entirely from offering assertions and opinions about a familiar subject to asking questions about the same situation at a metaphorical level. It seems to me that the poem worked well for many of these students in disrupting a view of teenage sexuality and pregnancy that has proven to be extremely intractable because it has been reified and perpetuated in cultural assumptions, in Christian religious beliefs, and in a "realistic" morality. Many students

were quite confident up to this point that they knew how to read and understand the poem and seemed reasonably content with this mastery. They now found, however, that a literal, naturalistic reading did not serve them well. As a result, they were persuaded to look at what might appear at first to be simply the cliched story of an unwed pregnant teenager from another, possibly more interesting or disconcerting, vantage point. The hesitant, indecisive, and fragmentary nature of Allison's comments after this point reveal an abrupt and marked shift in tone and confidence from those cited above:

> *What is ment by "when the night was pure, pure as we knew we still were."*
> *Why ~~did she~~ were they all ashamed.*
> *Who is the tribe? Maybe other very ~~ami~~ imaginative girls who have been in the homes.*
> *I don't understant why all the literary aditives*
> *Is the story about the author because it's signed from Diane.*
> *the ~~lady of the night~~ "lady of the light"*

The confusion and uncertainty with which Allison and many of her classmates meet images that they deem to be impossible seem to me to provide convincing support for the work of theorists such as Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris who point to the subversive and transformative potential of magical realism as a genre.[3] They argue that the dislocated and uneasy sense that ordinary laws of nature and common sense no longer apply can be a source of anxiety but also a source of great creativity, and that it can help us to construct a vision of a world in which the boundaries between the possible and the impossible are more fluid:

> Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts.... Magical realist texts are subversive; their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women.[4]

Tina-Jo (f)

Tina-Jo's response, in the same way as those she wrote in response to all of the texts I offered, is reflective, articulate, and detailed in working out her thoughts and impressions. I cite it at length here because it illustrates very clearly the intricate mental, emotional, and physical processes by which a reader forges a reading. It also demonstrates to me that any attempt to "evaluate" these responses in a traditional positivist sense, which is how most school language arts curricula continue to understand and use the word, may be an impossible, irrelevant, and/or indefensible project. It begins by focusing on the boyfriend's subjectivity rather than that of the pregnant teen and imaginatively recreates both the substance and the romantic tone of his letters, although the poem provides no direct exposition about their contents or nature:

> *In this little paragraph it sounds like she has a Son or daughter and the father of the baby goes to a school a little ways away from this "Home" so he writes her poems everyday either saying how much he misses and loves her and the baby or maybe how much he regrets getting her pregnant and ~~runin~~ ruining her life. It almost sounds like the girl was in high school when she got pregnat and she went to this "Home" to have the baby or just get back on her feet.*

This response takes a gentle and sympathetic approach, acknowledging the serious emotional and psychological repercussions for the girl who is still a teen and unprepared for a pregnancy. Although at this point Tina-Jo's comments seem to deliberately resist passing judgement, they do seem to place the lion's share of responsibility squarely on the girl's shoulders. Their tone suggests to me that the "mistake" (the word is repeated five times) belongs to the girl and that only her own carelessness and poor judgement are to blame for her predicament:

> *It almost sounds like she doesn't regret anything at all. She knows she made mistakes and she will learn from them by getting on with her life. She can still love "J" even though she made a mistake(s). Everyone is allowed a few mistakes in their life time and I guess this was some of the mistake she had maid in her lifetime. Just because a person has made a mistake does not mean they are a bad person.*

She doesn't regret giving up her child because she is probably to young her life may not go on the same because she will be thinking about "Her child" and how much she misses it. Later on in life she might wonder how he/she is and are the healthy and in a good family? She may not talk about it but she will constintely think about it and she will always have that memmory of "Her" child.

In this reading, personal responsibility and blame seem to be assigned to the girl and her boyfriend on the basis of a wealth of knowledge about the degree of physical and psychological maturity, the mental health, the insight, and the capacity for self-restraint that boys and girls typically exhibit:

She seems to be travelling a long path or has a long way to go before she can get through what happened to her. This seems to explain why that "man" was writing her poems. I think he was "sick" (mentaly) and was at a school to make him better for doing what he was doing. I think these girls are strong for trying to get over this "mess" and get through the desert (or the long road they have to take in order to find the end). I think men/women who like to rape minnor or force people into sex, are not trustworthy and need to get a grip on real life, and they also need to go and see a doctor to control their hormones. It seems that he is trying to make her jealous by all his other dates with "un-pregnant girls." He also sounds like he is a mover, once he is done doing what he wanted to accomplish with one person he will totally forget about you and your feelings and move on like you did not even exist. I think that he is basically cheating on her and she wants to get back at him for what he has done and she also does not want anything to do with him or does not even want to be reminded of him so she is going to get rid of "things" that remind her of him. So she is going to kill him and the children they had together and she would take off out of town like a madman.

At this point, Tina-Jo abandons all of the most obvious viewpoints offered by the poem and adopts instead what she imagines would be the baby's perspective on the girl's decision and its repercussions. From the perspective of an abandoned infant, the girl's solution to her problem is selfish and much too easy:

Now, she seems like a person who runs away from things. She has one problem and does not know how to solve it and just says "forget about it, it's no big deal" and skips town. It's not fair to other people especially to her baby, who she never got to know, just to give up on things without trying or even giving somebody a chance to prove that they can be a good person. Her baby is going to grow up wondering what kind of person her mother was. and why she was given up, but she is never going to know that because her mother left.

It might prove to be revealing for Tina-Jo if a teacher were to point to almost any sentence in her response and ask her to take another look at what she has written, not with respect to elaborating on the sense of her comments or explaining more fully what she intended to say but with respect to the words that she has written, as they appear on the page.

Tina-Jo, unlike many students, reads the poem as an attempt by Diana, the author/narrator, to embody an explicitly didactic religious/moral lesson. She appears to imagine Diana as a loving but stern mother-figure. The rational, non-judgmental stance that her earlier comments seem intended to convey seems to me to collide at this point with deep-seated fantasies around an idealized, "heavenly" mother who embodies the Christian virtues of self-sacrifice and self-discipline and another mother from hell who is entirely evil and selfish. The conflict between these two images works itself out in Tina-Jo's reading in its attention to notions of transgression, guilt, and retribution:

This person/Lady Diane seems to be the person who believes in things who follows the light of day and not the darkness of night like the "women." She (Diane) seem to be the type of person who likes to help people such as the lady in this story get through problems. Diane seems to be the type of person who wants to lead people to heaven and the lady in the story wanted to go toward Hell for example—"like the sorceress leave for another world, in her chariot drawn by dragons", "she flew in her chariot with all her dragonlady power to Berkeley... " Diane is trying to teach and tell people what is wrong and right and what you should and shouldn't do to solve these problems.

Aarron (f)

Unlike the initial willingness shown in Tina-Jo's response to adopt the boy's perspective and to imagine a romantic scenario around his letters, Aarron's comments clearly focus her interest and her sympathy on the girl. This does not mean, however, that she reduces the complexity of an unplanned teen pregnancy by simply blaming the boy and viewing the girl as a victim.

> *Why isn't he calling her instead of writing letters. The story so far tells me that he left her (betrayed) but still writes letters to her. Why did he leave her when she was pregnant but still keeps contact with her.*

The word betrayed, carefully enclosed in brackets, is suitably ambiguous about whether it is used as a verb—an elaboration of the word "left"—or as an adjective to describe the girl whom he has left in spite of her best efforts to cling to him:

> *It tells me that she really loved him but couldn't hang on to him. But she didn't want the kid that J gave her so she gave it up because it reminds her of J so much I guess.*

The next portion of Aarron's response uses blunt, no-nonsense language to talk about a situation that many students felt compelled to handle very delicately:

> *Question: I don't understand why the girls feel ashamed of their selves because the boys took on a great responsibility. But it don't think that they cared at all about the girls and what happens to them. ~~And they~~ Most of them just want some tail but both sex's have the same responsibilities.*
>
> *Question: Why does he keep rubbing it in her face that he's going out with other girls that are un-pregnant. Why does he kep writing letters to her when he left her in a home for unwed mothers.*
>
> *She finely spoke out to J and told him that she wanted him to go away.*
>
> *Question: Why did she give up her baby? Doesn't she even think about it at all and that is if she did the right thing or not?*

Aarron's response strikes me as an uncompromisingly honest attempt to wrestle with a difficult issue and to appreciate the feelings and motivations of both characters. She seems to be relatively unperturbed by the number of unanswered questions that the poem raises for her. I found it interesting to note that Aarron views her comments as answers to

some difficult questions, although in this case I gave them no prompts or directions of any kind about how to respond:

> *I don't understand the poem at all except for some parts. When you had to answer the questions you had to guess at them. Because I did and I had a lot of questions about this poem.*

Aarron's comments, like Tina-Jo's, reveal an encyclopedic knowledge and a great deal of both anxiety and anger around the sex/gendered and asymmetrical social, psychological and emotional codes that surround heterosexual dating, love, sex, and procreation.

Raine (f)

Raine's response echoes Aaron's sentiments in many respects while it is also evident that the poem calls up some very different associations, beliefs, and emotions for her. Like "The Little Prince," this poem provides few textual details and leaves large gaps in the narrative that a reader must fill in with images if the black marks on the page are to become a story in the reader's head. Although, in Raine's story, the girl is "sticking up for what she believes in" and "seems like an optimist," her reading does not appear to imagine the girl as a strong or powerful figure, or even as a plucky survivor in the way that some did. Instead, she appears to be abandoned, destitute, and powerless while her boyfriend is invested with subjectivity, agency, social standing, money, and the power of choice:

> *It seems like her boyfriend is rich and kind of abandoned her by leaving her in a home for unwed mothers while he is in his prep school. She seems poor. I think that it's good that the girl is sticking up for what she believes in. But, she should give up J because he abandoned her. He seems like a jerk. This girl seems like an optimist. I don't think the social worker should judge her. She shouldn't say she FAILED.*

This reading sees the girl as victimized by a patriarchal culture as it is worked out in her romantic relationships, by the asymmetrical moral codes she has internalized, and by her precarious socio-economic status. It seems that the most that this narrative can envision for the girls in the home is survival and an uneasy, depressive stasis (in every bio-medical, mechanical, and psychoanalytic sense of the word):

The poet here is stating that all of these girls—no matter what, are the same. They are all lost and no one knows what to do. They want to live and get through this.

Like I said, this guy is a jerk. She is totally devoted to him, and he is seeing other girls while her life is on pause because she is pregnant. I think that it is right for her to forget about him because he doesn't care how much he hurt her.

Here she is saying that she got rid of her old life, and now she is starting a new one. The "tribe" stands for the girls who were with her in the home. She is saying that half the girls in that home are probably turning out the same way that she is.

This part was kind of confusing. I guess she is just saying that her life is just beginning and she shouldn't of been in her situation before but now she is well off.

Ninja (M)

Ninja begins his reading by striving to fill in some bits of missing information while appearing to actively ignore others. Unlike most female readers, Ninja doesn't immediately assume that J is the girl's boyfriend, and he either doesn't envision or avoids mention of a pregnancy. He may simply be unfamiliar with the term "unwed mother," or he may be refusing to engage with a topic that provokes anxiety and discomfort:

I'm wondering who "He" is that writes to her from his prep school, is he a boyfriend, brother, or what. The place reminds me of a group home because its dusty and scrubby and she's the only one who wants to read poetry.

In response to the second section of the poem, Ninja again disregards (doesn't look at; doesn't see; doesn't deem noteworthy; refuses to notice/consider/confront/discuss?) words and phrases such as "love," "giving up her child," and "her mistakes." He comments instead on an aspect of the poem that possibly feels less threatening, taking issue with the social workers who sit in judgment and presume to dictate morality for another person:

Why are the social workers judging her on her decisions about how she deals with problems. And who are they to say she failed and how do they know that makes you fail anyway.

The language of Ninja's response considers the girl's "decisions" and "problems" in general and abstract terms, which may serve to keep what could be a painful situation at arm's length. His response to the next section of the poem takes the form of a long, highly abstract, philosophical, and legalistic argument about the nature and the definition of "badness" and "purity." I find these comments extremely interesting, not so much for what they point to, but for what they elide:

I think this whole passage is relating ~~who~~ how the people wandering the desert were the bad people because they walked among the bad and knew what bad was. But when she says that she didn't know all the desert animals which I see as the bad people it's like she's saying she didn't know what bad was so couldn't be bad herself. Or it could show how she never pays attention to the bad so stays pure still wandering through the desert.

This meditation on "badness" reminds me of Melville's more poetic, esoteric, and decontextualized musings in *Moby Dick* about, for example, the color white. They make no reference to any of the words or details in the poem that explicitly or implicitly conjure up the physical reality of rape, incest, promiscuity, disillusionment or pain.

Ninja's response to the next section of the poem is also abstract and unfocused, whether because of some anxiety or because the language of the poem is inaccessible to him. It suggests that the poem creates at least some tension in this reader which doesn't allow for an easy or comfortable separation between the poems "realistic" and "fantastic" elements. The fantasy about Medea becomes a deliberate attempt (by the girl, by Ninja, or both) to construct an alternate reality, but keeping this discussion on a very cerebral plane appears to contain/nullify any disturbing emotions the poem might otherwise evoke.

I think she thinks of her life as a fairy tale and is trying to make it true in her ~~(present day)~~ own way. ... She is trying to be stronger, but I don't agree that you are weak if you have regrets. She is trying to make the fairy tale true in her own way without killing but just leaving.

In this reading, the supernatural resolution of the myth (Medea slays her lover and her children and flies off in her chariot pulled by winged dragons to another world) seems to be something that the girl actively seeks, rather than a drastic and unhappy consequence of Medea's feelings of rejection, her consuming rage, and her desire for revenge.

In the next section, Ninja's comments explore the tacit and complicated associations between the speaker, the protagonist, and the author of the poem:

> *I think she sees herself as the lady of light because she could move on with her life without love or anyone. And because she probably thinks that she is doing better without love because then she won't be tempted to eat the apple again and be tempted into sex or anyone.*

This reading establishes a definite connection between the Christian notion of Original Sin and the girl's present-day, pragmatic decisions about dating, intimacy, and sexual activity, and seems to place a high value on both emotional independence and sexual abstinence outside of marriage. It imbues her actions with a sense of shame, rather than interpreting them, as other readers do, as a bold act of defiance or a triumph over the strictures of traditional Christian morality.

Tommy (M)

Although the words in the poem say only that "She is in the Home for Unwed Mothers in Pasadena," Tommy's response begins with the assumption that the girl's parents "put" her there and articulates his emotional reaction to that fact quite bluntly:

> *Why was she put in a home for unwed mothers? Did this young girls parents disown her? How old is the lady? Why is she still in the home if she gave away her child. I believe that putting pregnant ladies or girls in homes just because they are pregnant because they are single. I believe that is stupid.*

This reading seems not only to assume that the girl had no voice or choice in the matter, but that her parents may have disowned (rejected, refused acceptance or approval, denied, disallowed, disavowed, repudiated) their daughter.

The next section of Tommy's response begins with a series of questions which seem to imply that the girl *would,* or possibly *should,* naturally regret having sex and getting pregnant. At the same time, it questions this stance of moral superiority, at least in the social worker and the author if not explicitly in himself:

Why doesn't she regret what she did? Why is the guy's name just spelled with a J? Why does the social worker believe that she has "Failed?" Why does the author state that she was "bad?"

These comments confuse, as they attempt to clarify, the distinction between the social workers' and the poet's judgements and the reader's more objective and independent evaluation of the girl's behavior. Although the questions above seem to discourage the practice of judging others, they don't appear to locate any tension or possible irony in a contradiction between the social worker's and the poet's opinions. It would be interesting to ask Tommy to revisit and probe this response in order to see whether a closer examination would cause him to recognize a predisposition to flatten out the poem in order to make questions about the girl's "goodness" or "badness" more manageable.

Whyat are these 13 year old girls doing sleeping with doctors? Don't these people have parents? Where are the mothers with who the father's rape their daughter?

The circular wording of the last sentence creates a fecund ambiguity around the question of whether/how mothers are implicated when fathers rape their daughters, but it does highlight the mothers' responsibility rather than the fathers' actions or the daughters' experience.

Tommy's response to the violence in the next section of the poem appears to contain at least some degree of anxiety. It meets the girl's fantasized murderous revenge and the image of a powerful and fearsome sorceress with the question: "Is she [the girl] in a mental institution?" Her sanity becomes the central issue rather than, as was the case for some of the other readers, the poet's credibility or the poem's aesthetic merits. This might be true because, for Tommy, discounting the girl and/or the poem as crazy seems preferable to admitting an image of the girl as a powerful, angry, and dangerous force, either literally or metaphorically.

His response continues with what appears to be a suggestion that whether she is insane or not, it is the girl's fantasy about murdering her children, not the idea that she might murder her lover, that causes Tommy to stop and protest:

Why would she kill her children despite the fact that her boyfriend is going out with other non-pregnant girls? Why would she have no choice?

Regardless of the circumstances, her boyfriend's inconstancy, and even given the suspicion voiced above about the girl's mental health, Tommy resists the image of a woman who could kill her children—whether the woman in question is the girl or the mythical sorceress. In addition, the last question suggests that no matter what her mental state, such an act would indeed be a considered choice rather than a compulsion. Tommy's response, no less than those of his female classmates, evinces a certainty that girls and women carry an inordinate share of responsibility in all matters relating to sex, family, and the care of children.

Curtis (M)

Curtis doesn't read the description of the girl's situation as evidence that her parents have rejected her. Instead, he wonders why the boyfriend isn't "looking after" her:

> *Why isn't the girl with her boyfriend living at home? Why isn't the boyfriend looking after her girlfriend if they are going to have a baby.*
>
> *Why aren't they living together if they brought a new creation to this world?*

This reading assumes that the girl does need looking after. Marriage is not apparently the central issue, but the idea of a single girl raising a baby alone is clearly unacceptable. The reference to the baby as a "new creation" imbues the pregnancy with a religious or spiritual significance. Curtis clearly bases his response in very traditional notions about appropriate sex/gender roles, but I see no connection to one stereotypical representation of male thinking around sexuality which defines sex as a purely physical and selfish encounter that might have unintended and unfortunate consequences only for the girl.

While Curtis's comments express sympathy and concern for the girl, they also clearly spring from some assumptions that he has quite possibly never formulated or identified consciously, but which nevertheless play a fundamental role in shaping his reading of this poem:

> *Why does she think she hasn't done anything wrong? Why doesn't she regret giving up her baby? If she still loves J, why isn't she with him? Why does she think her life will just go on? How can your life just go on, after loseing a baby? ~~I guess~~ ~~I it w~~ I can't believe that, nobody can forget about something like losing a baby and no matter what your life is always changed.*

The questions Curtis asks here presuppose that the girl *has* done something wrong, expressing something like disbelief, dismay, and/or indignation at the suggestion that the girl would not suffer if she chose to relinquish her baby. He first uses the phrase "giving up" (an active and conscious act of relinquishing, abandoning, handing over, or deserting) to describe what happens to the baby, but in the following sentences, he substitutes the word "losing" (a passive, consciously unintended misplacing; an involuntary bereavement). Curtis's response appears to be based on the conviction that when a sexual encounter results in pregnancy, both parties share an obligation to the forthcoming child, and that once there is a pregnancy, any course of action will have a significant and lasting impact on both parties.

> *In this ~~part~~ section girls are assamed of what they were, or what happened to them. Some girls in this part I feel shouldn't be assamed because they have not done anything wrong. Girls who have been raped by their fathers, or girls who ~~we all~~ are pregnant, really shouldn't be assamed. It's not there fault. In both cases it took two, to do the crime.*

Curtis reads the girls' feelings as primarily shame about *what they were*, rather than what they have done or what has been done to them. He argues that *some* of the girls shouldn't feel ashamed and states what some student readers took to be self-evident—that a girl who is raped by her father is not to blame. He then undercuts this sympathetic view with a statement that does, in fact, assign an equal share of blame to the girls. Whether she was raped by her father, was only 13 years old, or engaged in consensual sex, "it took two to do the crime."

In subsequent portions of his response, Curtis makes it clear that although "J is a jerk," this in no way excuses the girl of responsibility for a repugnant and vengeful act toward the boyfriend or her casual dismissal of her child:

> *Why would J write letters to her, just to talk about his un-pregnant girls. J is a jerk. Nobody should write a letter to an old girlfriend, just to talk about other girls he's gone out with.*
>
> *Why did the girl figure that killing his children, and then killing him, will make him suffer? I figure she would be the one suffering, children have a better connection to their mother then the father.*

The girl I figure gave up her baby way to early. She figures only the weak have regrets, and I don't agree with that. No matter how strong or how weak you are you will always regret a couple things you've done in your life time. Everybody does something they regret. The girl then flys around to different countries. First of all you can't fly, and why would she talk about herself in the café.

Curtis seems certain that taking revenge in this way would necessarily cost a woman too much. He does not say that this would cause her great suffering because a mother has an intimate connection with her child. Instead, he represents infanticide as the betrayal of this primary symbiotic relationship from the child's point of view, and then continues to take this perspective by implying that keeping the baby would have been a better choice (for the baby) than giving her/him up for adoption.

The last sentence in this response clearly points to a conflict between two very strong adolescent desires: the desire to assert one's independence and to assume responsibility for a new baby, and a competing desire to remain dependent on their own parents.

The home for unwed mothers I feel is a scam. Everybody should be able to look after themselves, and have support from somebody else to raise the children.

The onus seems to be on the girl and her boyfriend to bring the baby into a loving, nurturing home, although the grandparents are presumably included in the general population of "somebody else" who should provide support so that unwed mothers can keep their children.

Jaraf (m)

The aspect of Jaraf's response that I find most interesting is its movement from what seems to be a fairly detached curiosity and an intellectual sympathy for the pregnant teen toward a strong visceral and defensive reaction that appears to be compounded of shock, horror, disbelief and contempt—whether this reaction is elicited by the girl, by Medea, or by an affective charge that attaches to both and binds them together. After reading the first six lines, Jaraf writes:

The girl who is unwed, why is she in an unwed home. Why does she memorize Shakespeare.

In response to the following nine lines, his comments are still largely analytical rather than emotional, but they begin to voice a disapproval which sounds to me very much like a thin disguise for some degree of unacknowledged anxiety:

> *If she really loved her husband she would have a really hard time moving on, and not caring, or regreting. Only the weak are foolish. The rational thinkers regret and reconsider. She is simple minded, and heartless.... I think that this women is either a really overactive imaginative women, or a helusagenic.*

The last word suggests that the girl/Medea is not necessarily insane or psychotic—she may be under the influence of a perception-distorting drug. Although this reading appears to consciously attempt to sympathize with the girl's predicament, it also dilutes this sympathy by judging her (her self rather than her actions) quite harshly as "weak," "foolish," "simple-minded," and "heartless". Once the poem introduces the figure of Medea, however, this relatively mild, mostly cerebral response quickly adopts a colorful, exaggerated vocabulary and style that to me suggests a level of physical and psychological involvement/arousal that might be called hysteria:

> *Well now I think the witch is not only helasa genic, but she's also a kid killer psycopath.*
>
> *Who is going to believe some crazy women teling a story to you in a café about her witcheries, and her life of murder, betrayal, and black magic.*
>
> *I think she is evil and guilty.*

It seems to me that at this point, Jaraf's reading does not notice/pay attention to some textual cues that other readers used to process the story of Medea as the poem introduces it. His reading appears to run into difficulty here because it does not read the story about revenge and murder as a fantasy or a metaphor for the girl's situation and feelings. Instead, it responds to what it takes to be the poem's literal recounting of a story about an insane and evil mother/witch who murders her children. For this reader, the poem has apparently blurred the demarcation between fantasy and reality too successfully and he reacts powerfully and negatively to the images it evokes.

Marylin Manson (m)

Marylin Manson's reading focuses first on the girl's feelings for J and about her pregnancy, asking questions that appear to be genuine expressions of curiosity and puzzlement:

What makes her love Jay?

Why doesn't she regret doing anything for love.

Why is she bad?

Didn't she kill her children?

is she scared to talk abour her mistakes?

After lines sixteen to twenty-eight, MM's questions seem much more rhetorical and judgmental than requests for information. The girls in the home, not the men who got them pregnant, are disturbed, defective, immoral, and presumably responsible for their own difficulties:

Why do all those girls have problems is there any normal girls in that place or do they all have something wrong with them.

Why are all these 13 year old girls doing sleeping with doctors who are much older then them.

This reading ignores what many readers took to be a textual prerequisite that they adopt the girl's subjectivity, focusing instead on the boyfriend's situation and his point of view. It seems to me quite likely that this is an unconscious strategy designed to disavow/discharge/defend against the uncomfortable feelings of a male reader who identifies with the boyfriend but who also, on some level, hears and acknowledges the guilt of these males specifically and all males collectively:

What does she care if he dates other girls what does she expect him to do live life without anybody and why would she wanna kill him or her two children what kind of mother would do a thing like that.

I feel that if you are man enough to have a child you should be able to pay and support all of it's needs it is your responsibility you have to think about the consequences.

The last sentence is interesting because it introduces a marked shift and a disjuncture in the tone of MM's response. Where the previous sentence sounds to me to be an

unstudied, genuine reaction to these specific characters' actions, this one raises the discussion about teen sex and pregnancy to an abstract level. It expresses sentiments that may be correct and rational, but are probably not very useful in helping this particular reader to manage the emotional demands made of him by this particular poem.

Cosmo (m)

Cosmo's response focuses not on the boyfriend or on the problem of a pregnancy itself, but on the girl's relationship with her parents and their responsibility. Cosmo reads the situation from the girl's perspective and implies quite clearly that both her parents and the social worker (standing in for the larger community) have let her down. Her age becomes a question with respect to the parents' responsibility. The hesitancy of the language in the second sentence seems to me to mirror some confusion, doubt, or ambivalence toward the girl and the notion of failure as it applies to her:

> *Why wouldn't she go to her parents if she needed to stay somewhere? Did she ever tell them that she was pregnant? How old is she?*
> *I thought that social workers were suppost to be supporting, not telling their patients ~~they're~~ they've ~~failures~~ failed in life.*

Cosmo's comments continue in this same vein, defending the girl(s) and blaming the boy(s) who have betrayed and harmed them. An expression of pure bewilderment is reserved for the parents' indifference toward their daughter.

> *By desert rattlers I think she means all the men who have poisoned their lives. Why would any person put a young pregnant woman in a home. Don't her parents care about their daughter and/or grandchild?*

Cosmo does not appear to either identify with the boy or feel a need to deflect/deny any guilt by association. Instead, he clearly identifies with the girl and blames everybody implicated in her unhappiness:

> *The guy writing the letters sounds like a jerk. He's insensitive, if he is the one who caused the pregnancy why would he tell her seeing other girls. He's already made a huge commitment with Diane.*

This response differs from Cosmo's classmates in at least two important respects: no other response gives the girl a name or a personality in the same way, and none are as articulate or as unbothered about the metaphorical function of the story within the poem.

One way to deal with anxiety related to the suggestion of violence is to condemn and punish the aggressor as Jaraf's response does; another is to confine it to the imaginary realm as Cosmo's does:

> *Diane ~~hears~~ says she's going to kill J, but I think she means that she would kill all her feelings for him. Along with that she would kill her relationship with him.*
>
> *Diane even though she's obviously hurt, she at least knows that all men aren't to blame it's just a select few who are real scum.*

Stu Cazzo (m)

Stu Cazzo disagrees with the narrator's and/or the girl's claim that she has not failed, but attaches this failure to her refusal to have and raise her child and her willful blindness to her own feelings rather than the pregnancy itself:

> *I think she has failed because she has no regrets giving up her child and not talking about her mistakes she doesn't believe she is bad and her life won't go on because she will remember. She will have a conscious.*

To Stu Cazzo, it seems certain that the girl is repressing and denying her guilt. Unlike some responses that berate the men who victimize the young girls in the home, this one shows a great deal of indignation and antipathy toward the girls, who are judged to be both morally suspect and unintelligent—not because they weren't smart enough to avoid being taken advantage of, but because they were "caught":

> *I think the girls are really dumb and not knowing anything they are doing how can you get caught with men and not knowing who and girls who were 13 is really dumb. What do they mean by the night was pure, pure as we knew we still were.*

Stu Cazzo's response doesn't appear to incorporate the story of Medea as a metaphor or a fantasy. Instead, it reacts to the poem as if all of its elements share the same literal reality and are subject to being judged by exactly the same intellectual, emotional, and moral standards:

> *I don't believe that she should kill him because of the letters of his dates and other girls. Sure I would get mad but I would not take a life away. What does*

she mean by leave for another world in her chariot drawn by dragons. Does it mean she is going to hide out.

Along with many other readers, Stu Cazzo believes that a woman who tries to convince herself that giving up a child would not be devastating is not only deluding herself, she is also crazy and wrong:

I don't believe she has no regrets because she would have to be phsycotic or not human. She is just repeating herself I think so that she can convince in her own mind she has not done anything wrong.

This emphasis on the girl's madness, however, is modified in Stu Cazzo's concluding comments, which appear to give her credit for "telling it like it is" and acknowledging her anger:

I think she is telling it like it is. Describing everyone in the poem the one's she hates most of all. And I think she is blaming Eve for daring to eat the apple is sort of saying that that is why people are making mistakes and doing wrong.

Conclusion

I had some misgivings about using "Medea the Sorceress" with these students. For a teacher who, according to mainstream reader-response theories, believes that it is necessary to engage students almost entirely on the basis of prior knowledge and personal experience, this poem would not be the most logically appropriate choice for this group. The poem is dated, it might be seen as somewhat "preachy," none of the students knew the story of Jason and Medea, the language is possibly too advanced for this group of students, and the obscure allusions in the final third of the poem are to people, events, and poets unfamiliar to these students. Nevertheless, they were, for the most part, both willing and able to make the kinds of concessions that the poem demanded of them in order to engage with it actively and productively.

Both male and female students were drawn into the poem, although in different ways and for different reasons. Their sympathies did not line up in any predictable or consistent way on the basis of their own sex/gender—boys were just as apt as girls to condemn a young father for reneging on his responsibility to his pregnant girlfriend, and both were equally insistent that a pregnancy would change things forever, at least for the mother and the infant. No matter whether a particular student was a boy or a girl or

whether s/he was traditional, conservative, sexist, feminist, or radical in her/his thinking, the poem apparently tapped into important unconscious desires and anxieties. My argument is that if students are encouraged to examine the nature and the function of these affective trigger points, they will come away with a fuller knowledge of themselves and their relation to the world around them.

It seems to me that students' comments about this poem highlight one of the major shortfalls of reader-response theories, which don't acknowledge that when a text, in some way, "hooks" a reader at the level of unconscious desire (whether the affect is positive or negative), other elements such as reading level, vocabulary, and prior experience are not the most important determinants of a worthwhile reading experience. Whether or not students were familiar with homes for unwed mothers, Medea, or Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, they did know about love, sex, pregnancy, jealousy, and revenge—although they knew very different things about them and therefore approached the reading from very different perspectives.

Notes: Chapter Seven

1 Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, 1991, 23.

2 Mark Bracher, *The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education*, 1999,. pp. 51-54. See also "Psychoanalysis and Education," 1999.

3 *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 1995.

4 *ibid*, pp. 5-6.

Chapter Eight: *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!* *Julie Newmar*

My Approach to the Text

Students were interested and enthusiastic when I told them that the next time we met, we would take a look at the movie *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*. Several of the students knew the movie and one boy assured the class that it was "majorly funny" while another gave it two thumbs down, arguing that it was "sick." It was the only text of the eight I selected that any of the students were familiar with prior to my work with them, and it was the only one that prompted a lively discussion among the students before I did anything with it.

On the designated day, they came into the classroom and quickly found their places. While I put the movie in the videocassette recorder and cued it up to begin, I asked students to pass around the cardboard jacket, which is illustrated with a scene from the movie. The pictures on the box and the brief description on the back triggered a fresh exchange of opinion and argumentation, but students shushed one another impatiently. This is a reaction that I immediately recognized and which I think has caused most language arts teachers at one time or another to wonder, in silent frustration or aloud to each other over coffee in the staffroom, why students never beg us for the next print text the way they do for a film.

To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar runs one hundred and ten minutes. To allow us to watch the movie in one sitting, their teacher and I chose an afternoon when this class had a double block for English (one hundred and fifty minutes). In the fifteen or twenty minutes of class time that remained when the movie was over, I passed out a sheet with several prompts and asked them to quickly record some initial general impressions of the movie. For the next class, I selected seven short segments and prepared a handout with writing prompts related to each segment and blank space in which to write. I showed each of these segments, pausing after each to allow students time to respond to the corresponding prompts. Twenty-six of the twenty-seven students who had previously given me signed consent forms were there both days and submitted the writing they did.

My Reading

The movie is a comedy that begins as two men step out of their respective showers. Vida Bohème (Patrick Swayze) is white, Noxeema Jackson (Wesley Snipes) is black. Both actors are tall, muscular, and physically fit, and both are well-known for playing (very) heterosexual romantic leads or (very) masculine action heroes. The camera follows them as they move around their separate New York apartments. We watch them put on makeup, wigs, lingerie, and dresses, transforming themselves into women for a drag queen beauty pageant. The two are awarded a first-place tie and both win prizes of a return air ticket and expenses for a trip to Hollywood, California, where they will compete in the national *Drag Queen of America* pageant. As they leave together, they discover another contestant huddled in a stairwell crying. Vida, who is exceptionally warm-hearted but also imperious, instructs Noxeema to "find out why that little Latin boy in drag is crying." When Chi Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo) tells them that s/he is crying because they are both so beautiful and s/he wanted to win the contest, Vida persuades Noxeema to take pity on her/him.[1] They sell the two airline tickets and with the money, they purchase a vintage Cadillac convertible so that all three can afford to make the trip.

At the outset of their journey, Vida makes a detour through an affluent neighborhood and pulls up outside of an imposing house which, she tells the other two, belongs to her parents. She parks the car and stares at the house but doesn't get out immediately. She is apparently steeling herself to do so when a woman opens the door and steps out. We can guess by Vida's pleased and expectant reaction that the woman is her mother. When she looks at the car and recognizes Vida, she very calmly and deliberately turns her back on her visitors, goes inside, and firmly shuts the door. Vida doesn't register much surprise and doesn't get out of the car or try to speak to her. Instead, she rips up the map she is holding, slams the car in gear, and roars away.

The three have many adventures as they head for California which seem designed to illustrate that while they are very different from one another, all three are vulnerable, tough, hopeful, kind human beings, and that their indeterminate sex/gender has caused each one to experience a great deal of pain and rejection.

Eventually they get lost and find themselves in an unnamed state in the southwest, where they get stopped by Sheriff Dollard (one of the movie's running gags concerns his name—his badge reads "Dullard"), a buffoonish, red-necked bully who points out that they have a broken tail light. He then looks admiringly at Vida and tells her "You know, we don't go for that around here—white girls ridin' around with niggers and spics." After ordering Vida to get out of the Cadillac, he leads her to his own car and tries to kiss her while assuring her that she wants the same thing every "career girl" does. Vida struggles as the sheriff lifts her onto the hood of the police car and attempts to molest her. He puts his hand under Vida's dress and registers shock and horror when he realizes that he is fondling a man. At the same time, Vida says "Get your hand off my dick!" knees him in the groin, and pushes him away violently. The sheriff falls backward and hits his head on the pavement with enough force that he loses consciousness. Vida and her friends shake him, but when they can't wake him up, they conclude that Vida has killed him, and drive away.

A short while later, they stop to regroup and freshen up but find themselves stranded when their car won't start. Bobby-Ray, whom Chi-Chi calls her "knight in shining pickup truck" comes by and offers them a ride into Snydersville, which proves to be a *very* small and decidedly retrogressive Midwestern town. Virgil, the town's surly mechanic, can't get parts to repair their Cadillac until Monday morning, so they are forced to take a room in Virgil's house where they stay over the weekend. They meet and get to know an assortment of eccentric and unworldly but mostly kind townspeople including Carol-Anne, Virgil's abused wife, and Bobby-Lee, their shy, pretty daughter. They also run into the town's clutch of young male "tough guys." When Chi-Chi goes off by herself for a walk, they stop her and threaten to molest her until Bobby-Ray drives by and rescues her. Bobby-Ray is apparently the only (gentle)man in town aside from Jimmy-Joe, who is black, owns the only café in Snydersville, and is both burly and gentle. One of the movie's many sub-plots involves Beatrice, one of the white townswomen, who loves Jimmy-Joe but has never admitted her feelings because, until Vida intervenes, an interracial romance would have been unthinkable.

In the course of two days, the drag queens win over and transform the residents of Snydersville through their combination of unselfishness, courage, humor, and style. By

the time Monday morning arrives, thanks to the drag queens, Carol-Anne has been freed from Virgil's tyranny, Bobby-Lee and Bobby-Ray are a couple, as are Beatrice and Jimmy-Joe, the teen delinquents have been transformed into polite young gentlemen, and the townspeople have helped Vida and her friends elude Sheriff Dollard, who is very much alive and searching obsessively for the man who humiliated him. The final scene shows Chi-Chi being crowned the new "Drag Queen of America." As Vida promised, during the course of their journey, the "little Latin boy in drag" has acquired the "outrageous outlook and indomitable spirit of a full-fledged drag queen."

Print Text VS Film Text

In retrospect, I found *To Wong Foo...* to be an interesting choice of texts for several reasons. Of the eight that I selected, it is undoubtedly the text that students would be most likely to encounter outside of school because, although critically panned, it had been fairly widely distributed in theatres. In my view, it is also the most self-consciously pedagogical, designed to entertain while teaching some painless lessons about love, acceptance, and unselfishness. To this end, the situation and the characters are romanticized and flattened out, in an effort to guarantee that an audience will "get it." The differences between film and print text made the movie a good choice for several reasons. The movie drives its point home dramatically, in Technicolor and Dolby stereo, and contains almost no shades of grey. Unlike some of the print texts I asked them to read, students were confident that they understood the movie, and, with the exception of three vocal males, they liked it and agreed with its ideological stance. It seems to me that, in the students' view, the movie tells a funny story and illustrates a significant moral lesson. However, in spite of its unconventional subject matter, it did not provoke students to challenge its uniformly two-dimensional portraits of women, blacks, Hispanics, gays and misogynist, bigoted straight white males, nor did it force them outside of their comfort zones, encourage them to confront their own blind spots and prejudices, or cause them to re-evaluate any of the difficult social/moral/psychological dilemmas that it poses and then resolves speedily and neatly.

It seems to me that responses like those above illustrate, clearly and concretely, the workings of projective identification, a psychoanalytic concept which helps to illuminate the psychological underpinnings of idealization, empathy, hatred, and fear. The term was first formulated and defined by Melanie Klein but is now widely used and accepted by psychoanalysts and psychotherapists of many different theoretical schools.[2] It refers to a psychic mechanism which allows us to disavow certain aspects of ourselves (either good or bad) which would otherwise induce pain, discomfort, or anxiety. One way of managing these phenomena, whether they are feelings or behaviors, is through an unconscious process by which we "split off" those qualities, feelings, or behaviors that we are unwilling to accept in ourselves and attribute them to somebody or something else. This does not mean that by doing so we can successfully defuse the affective charge that these projections hold; we often retain a strong emotional connection and a sense of identification with the recipient of the projection. Some of the most intense and confusing human interactions come about precisely because we identify very strongly with these projections even though we may not recognize them as (largely) creations of our own psychic world.[3]

It seems to me that this concept is fundamental to understanding the volatile and powerful emotions that are so often triggered when a reader engages with a fictional text. Very often, when we pay attention, it becomes apparent that an emotional response to a character or something the character does or says cannot be adequately explained without appreciating the degree to which that response involves an intense identification with some element of ourselves that we have split off and projected onto that character.

"Vida had always longed for someone to love her, that's what her dream was"

The remaining ten of the thirteen male students and all fourteen female students sympathize with Vida, expressing feelings of sadness and anger at the way Vida's mother reacts. In many of these responses, the route by which students enter or are pulled into the text emotionally seems to be by way of their identification with a vulnerable child rejected by a powerful parent. **Marylin Manson's (m)** response suggests that there is no clear distinction between his own disappointment and Vida's when the movie fails to satisfy the desire for an approving, loving parent:

It made me feel disappointed because your supposed to love your kids unconditionally... The mother doesn't love her any more but the lady she meets in that little town told him that she loved him and she barely knew him.

For him, as for many students, the mother's behavior is not simply an individual instance of cruelty or indifference but appears to be felt as an offense against universal laws governing parental behavior. In the same way, **Allison (f)** sees love and respect as mandatory for a parent:

This scene makes me mad because a parent should love and respect there children and whatever they believe in

In **Alyssa's (f)** reading, loyalty and unselfish acceptance are the benchmarks by which Vida's mother is judged and found wanting:

I felt bad for Vida because his/her mother shouldn't disown Vida for what she choose for a career. It is very mean and cruel. She should accept what vida decided to do. Still flesh and blood.... It's not right to do that to a person especially your own son or daughter. She got to put what her feelings about her son and accept the fact he is a drag queen.

For **Sunflower (f)**, a mother's love must go beyond a simple or passive acceptance of a son or daughter. To be considered adequate, it must include an active, effortful attempt to understand the child:

I felt sympathy for Vida because she did not get a warm welcome from her mother, ~~Vida's moth~~ Mothers should be more understanding no matter what their children do.

Sunflower initially begins her second sentence with a very specific reference to "Vida's mother," but she changes her mind, strikes that out, and begins again. In this moment of hesitation and reflection, she appears to have made a conscious decision to broaden the scope of her comments and re-frame it as a generalization about all mothers.

A number of responses indicated that students are fully aware that the scene evokes strong feelings in them because they imaginatively recreate the experience with themselves and their own parents as actors. **Ninja's (m)** response recognizes this connection but remains provokingly silent about how he imagines the scene would play out between himself and his mother:

It makes me mad because it makes me stop and think of what my mom would do if that were me. She can't even except how her son is... Because it is family and family are the most important people who should love and accept you for who you are.

There are only ninety seconds of film between the scene in which Vida tells Noxeema and Chi-Chi that they are near the neighborhood where she grew up and where her parents still live, and the one in which the Cadillac races away again, tires squealing. Except for the tense, wordless exchange between Vida and her mother, which lasts thirty seconds, Vida's comments to her friends about her family are determinedly casual and jokey. However, **Cosmo's (m)** response is similar to many that interpret the look on Vida's face when her mother refuses to acknowledge her as pain and alienation, sketching in a loveless childhood and a "dream" for Vida in which she finds the love she craves:

I felt sorry for Vida because she grew up as an outcast in her family.... Vida had always longed for someone to love her, that's what her dream was.

Stu Cazzo (m) is equally direct about the sadness the scene evokes for him. As with most students' responses, careful attention to the language reveals intriguing complexities:

This scene makes me feel that he still has love for his mother and I feel sad for him being away from his family.

Stu Cazzo's comment goes well beyond a static observation that Vida loves his mother. The word "still" suggests that the relationship is a complicated and ambivalent one with an unhappy history. **Curtis (m)** also names the feelings that the scene evokes for him as sadness. He points, as many responses did, to the necessity of acceptance as a prerequisite for love:

It made me sad. Vida went to go visit her parents, but when she ^it gets there they act like they don't know ~~her~~. who ~~they~~ vida was. I think it's important because without acceptance you don't have love, and Vida's parents didn't accept ~~him her~~ it.

The many strikeouts in Curtis' response suggest a great deal of confusion, anxiety, or discomfort around the question of Vida's gender. It seems to me that Curtis solves the

problem for himself by rejecting both masculine and feminine pronouns in favor of the objectifying and neuter "it."

Theresa (f) defines her initial response as confusion which turns into a feeling which is not adequately expressed by the single word "mad":

> *I felt confused at first because I didn't know why Vida's mother left and I felt mad and upset with her mother for later ignoring Vida. I don't think Vida's mom accepted Vida for who she was. Vida accepted herself for who she was and what.*

Mercedes' (f) response goes beyond stating an opinion about how mothers should behave, or how Vida's mother falls short of this standard. It sketches a romantic, sepia-toned view of family life in which a difficult relationship between a parent and child is clearly an anomaly:

> *It makes me feel sad that Vida doesn't have a good relationship with his parents like everyone else.... They [the drag queens] love who they are but they are not accepted by their families. For a moment Vida thought finally her mom has excepted him but he was wrong.*

Mustang's (f) response also fastens on the mother's refusal to acknowledge her son, but her cryptic comments add an intriguing dimension whereby the mother's behavior may be the cause (directly or indirectly) of "everything"—a vague reference which suggests that their troubled relationship is, in some non-specific way, the fuel that drives the movie and Vida's life:

> *I feel bad for Vida, her mom just shut the door ~~and~~ its like she didn't even care about her son. Its important because it shows how Vida's mom didn't want anything to do with him because he was a drag queen. Maybe that's how everything started.*

Like Mustang's, **Tina-Jo's (f)** response points out that the trouble between Vida and his mother stems from Vida's choice to dress as a woman. However, Tina-Jo's consistent use of the present tense situates the problem entirely in the present, unlike many responses, such as Mustang's and Stu Cazzo's (above), that appear to imagine a long and troubled history between the two:

It makes me feel that the mother does not accept the son and does not like what he is doing.... The son wants his mother to love but she won't because of the fact that he is dressing like a girl.

Although Cosmo's response (above) is the only one to use the word "outcast" (rejected, despised, discarded, homeless, banished, forsaken), the images and feelings that the word conjures up suffuse the majority of responses by both males and females. For most students, Vida's ambivalent sex/gender does not present a barrier to empathy or identification, nor does this identification appear to be qualitatively different for male and female students. Aside from the three male responses discussed earlier, students appeared to relate to Vida not as a man or woman, nor as a son or daughter, but as a neglected child in need of a mother's love.

Read one after another, responses to the scene between Vida and her mother clearly testify to these students' knowledge that every child needs and expects to feel that s/he is loved, accepted, and special—with no conditions and no requirement for reciprocity. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl and Faith Bethelard name this concept "cherishment," and although students may not recognize the word, the idea would certainly not be foreign to them.[4]

The Sex/Gender Drama: Tragedy, Comedy, Melodrama or Farce?

It is impossible to say how the ambiguity of Vida's gendered identity affects the degree and the nature of students' empathy. However, it seems to me that several factors encouraged students to view the movie as fiction, which might have made them less inclined to censor or rationalize their emotional responses in the way that they might have if the movie had constructed characters that students could more easily accommodate within their more usual frame of reference by which sex/gender is both readily observable and an either/or question. Because Vida does not fit into either category and because the movie makes several tongue-in-cheek but explicit reference to fairy-tales in general, and "Cinderella" in particular[5], most students seem to interpret the drag queens as fantastic, cartoonish, broad-brush representations of human (mostly feminine) traits rather than as ordinary human beings subject to naturalized rules governing appropriate appearance and behavior for men and women. I did not get an impression from reading

students' responses that they had any awareness that drag queens are a localized but highly visible and extremely "realistic" presence in many large cities.

In my own reading, most of the characters in the movie are exaggerated, two-dimensional representations of various bizarre but easily recognizable stereotypes. Virtually every situation, every character, and every line of dialogue in the movie seems designed to enlist an audience's sympathy for a wide array of oppressed minorities at the same time that it reinforces popular conceptions and misconceptions about "Flamboyant, Sassy Drag Queens", "Stifled Housewives," "Misogynist White Males," "Bigoted Redneck Southerners," "Mouthy, Excitable Hispanics," and a host of other larger-than-life but two-dimensional representations. The movie is never subtle in its situations, characterizations, or sentiments. I initially thought that "To Wong Foo" would be a worthwhile viewing experience for adolescents because of its sympathetic treatment of marginalized groups, reasoning that if the movie triggered an empathetic response, it would necessarily encourage the development of highly valued moral qualities we teachers like to call "tolerance" and "understanding." I do believe that an emotional engagement is the route by which a text opens us up to the possibility for change. However, I have also come to realize that for many students, buying into the movie's ideology and accepting its offer of a feel-good "fix" of easy sentiment requires a minimum of effort on their part and actively discourages an examination of the limiting assumptions about men, women, gays, drag queens or southerners on which the movie depends. If I were to show "To Wong Foo" in the normal course of classroom instruction, I could ask questions and prepare activities that would encourage students to surface and interrogate these assumptions. What I hadn't thought through completely when I selected the movie was that, for the purposes of this study, the movie had to stand alone and speak for itself.

Once again, I found that by selecting certain scenes and asking specific questions, I very much determined what the students wrote and disallowed an infinite number of things that they may have been noticing and thinking about as they watched and processed the movie. For the most part, students' responses seemed consistent with my reading of the movie's ideology and political agenda, as illustrated by comments about various characters. Male characters, for example, fall into three quite distinct categories:

they are either a) white, straight, misogynist, abusive, racist, and stupid (Virgil, Sheriff Dollard, the town punks); b) sensitive, empathetic, philanthropic, decidedly feminine in appearance and behavior, intelligent, and representative of a variety of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic subcultures (the drag queens); or c) sensitive, sweet men whose sole dramatic purpose seems to be to provide the exception that proves the rule that most men will fit into one of the two previous categories (Bobby-Ray and Jimmy-Joe). Students' comments in relation to the male characters showed that, by and large, they had no difficulty sorting, flattening, and labeling the characters according to this spurious trichotomy.

Masculinity: "A Real man has to be in control and in domination"

Students unanimously judge Sheriff Dollard to be a despicable person, but each focuses in an individual way on very different aspects of his behavior. Eight readers refer to him as racist, seven label him a pig, six describe him as a pervert, and three call him sick. **Alyssa's (f)** colorful, blunt comments illustrate the resoundingly disapproving feelings of a majority of students:

> *He treats Vida like a slut (sorry), I guess he thinks they are easy. He is a pervert, sick pig who should be fired for the way he treated them/Vida. He more or less forced himself on Vida. Predijuice.*

However, there are two points at which the language of Alyssa's statement subverts my reading of it as a transparent and uncomplicated expression of disapproval/distaste. The first occurs when I find myself wondering why Alyssa says the sheriff "more or less" forced himself on Vida, since, to me, the scene shows Dollard aggressively molesting Vida, who protests loudly and resists vigorously. The second is the word "predijuice," which seems tacked on as a cryptic and undeveloped afterthought to comments that are, up to this point, fairly articulate and thoughtful observations about the sexual dynamics at work in the scene.

Seven responses focused explicitly on Sheriff Dollard's abuse of his authority as an agent of the law. **Mustang's (f)** comments communicate a mixture of indignation and contempt for his behavior. Her reading shows no surprise that Dollard believes that the combined privileges of his gender and his position make his power absolute, at least in relation to "a lady":

The way he treats Vida shows he is aggressive and it also shows just because he is a male officer he thinks he can do anything to a lady. He is rasist and a loser.

Ninja's (m) reading shares this view and extrapolates from this incident to conclude that this is just one instance in a long and continuing history of this kind of bullying. It is not clear, however, whether the power he abuses with impunity attaches more to the fact of his gender or his occupation:

He treats her like a piece of meat and it tells me he is Scum. It also tells me that he probably does that to many girls and gets away with it because he's a cop.

Tina-Jo (f) is particularly struck by the irony of Dollard's behavior in light of his career:

He is nothing but a losser and all he is interested in is sex. He is supposed to be a cop not a raper or Assulter. He is supposed to be protecting people not harming them.

Allison (f) makes an even more overt connection between the sheriff's position and his ability to flout the legal, moral, and ethical rules he is paid to enforce. He appears to do simply because he can. Many students, including Allison, see the exercise of power, for Sheriff Dollard, not as the means to some desired end (sex with Vida, for example), but as the end in itself:

This man likes to have power and since he's a cop he thinks he can use that as a power trip and an Authority Figure.

Students' reactions to the scene in which Vida rescues Carol-Anne from another beating at Virgil's hands also reveal an almost unanimous willingness to embrace the movie's heavy-handed moral "lessons." Only the first three male responses discussed above reject what they read as the movie's sympathy for the drag queens. They unanimously accept the view that it is cowardly and unmanly to hit a woman, but courageous and manly to hit another man in defense of a woman. As does the movie as a whole, this scene presents Vida's dilemma with such clarity and confidence that students appeared to accept Vida's action as inevitable, admirable, and altogether good. Vida proves her worth as a drag queen and as a man by showing that she can, indeed, "cut it as a man." In spite of a surface uniformity in students' responses, however, each reveals a

highly personal interpretation that, if students were asked to pause and examine it more closely, might destabilize and open up the easy and often empty platitudes about love, acceptance, tolerance, and harmony that the movie offers.

Tommy's (m) comments on this scene are lengthier than those of many other students. They strike me as a probably unconscious and almost certainly well-intentioned attempt to distance and manage a difficult/unsettling scene by wrapping it in a candy-floss cocoon of pithy aphorisms:

> *This scene intends to show us that a "real man" is someone who believes in their spouse and trusts their spouse and also knows that human's make mistakes, so you shouldn't go around using your fist to solve a problem. No [Chi-Chi's comment didn't provoke the violence] because Vida was already sick of hearing Carol-Anne being in pain.*

Although his comments do suggest that violence is repugnant and should be avoided whenever possible, it is difficult to tell whether Tommy ultimately frowns on or approves of Vida's use of his fists in defence of Carol-Anne.

Mustang (f) views the scene from a decidedly feminist perspective by which Vida's violent reaction arises out of his empathetic anger and desire to obtain revenge on behalf of all women who have been victims of male violence:

> *She/he [Vida] is sick of how ladies are treated by males. She wants to show Virgil if it feels good to be beaten by a female!*

What Mustang's comments ignore and obscure is that Vida is not a female, but neither is she/he entirely male. The movie (in my reading) underscores the notion that Vida's violent response to Virgil, Sheriff Dollard, and the town toughs results at least as much from an explosion of repressed rage as a result of her/his first-hand and cumulative experience with male aggression and homophobia as it does from an altruistic desire to defend a vulnerable woman. **Cosmo's (m)** response appears to begin with a romantic notion of a male code of honor, but it then acknowledges, if indirectly, that Vida is not reacting simply as an abused woman or as a chivalrous man; she/he is simultaneously both and neither:

I believe that "real men" shouldn't hit girls. It shows you are a man by how you respect women and all people. I think Vida had a lot of pain and suffering in her that needed to be let out.

Theresa's (f) response acknowledges that she agrees with what she accepts as one of the movie's self-evident truths, although it seems almost deliberately evasive and slightly coy about not defining exactly how real men should behave:

I think that "real men" should behave a certain way. (Strong). She I think that what Chi-Chi said to Vida got Vida upset and angry so Vida had enough with Virgil always hitting Carol-Anne.

This reading begins to articulate similarities and a sense of continuity which make the exchange between Vida and Virgil an extension of an ongoing power struggle that has developed between Vida and Chi-Chi. **Honda's (f)** response draws on a similar notion of masculinity but gives it an original twist:

This scene intends to show that a real man should get anything they want. Yes [Chi-Chi's comment did cause Vida to hit Virgil] because Chi-Chi made Vida think like a man for a sec, so Vida realize that is not the way to treat a ~~laid~~ ladies.

Honda's reading complicates the interpretation of this scene in two ways: first, by not making it clear whether her comments are to be understood as affirming or challenging the movie's representation of a real man and secondly, by making Chi-Chi the moral center of the scene rather than Vida.

Stu Cazzo (m) elaborates the emotional underpinnings of the two encounters by stressing that the same violent act defies a moral precept in the one instance and administers justice in the other, but it is, at the same time, an expression of Vida's anger:

A real man is not supposed to hit his wife he should love her and Vida makes him pay. Yes, I think Vida does get mad and took it out on virgil.

Curtis's (m) comments are more explicit about these connections and about the desire for dominance that fuels both encounters:

I think that this scene intends to show that a real man has to be in control and in domination. No, I think Vida already made up her mind that he/she was to help Carol-Anne. I just think Chi-Chi pushed him/her over the edge.

His reading points toward a recognition that Vida's desire to help Carol-Anne is another expression of a desire for power, and it seems to me that with some prompting and some time, Curtis might be able to articulate this significant thought.

Miguel's (m) reading interprets Vida's behavior as a way to manage her/his own wounded pride and frustration, and recognizes that there may be a deeply personal satisfaction for Vida in teaching Virgil a lesson which has nothing to do with rescuing Carol-Anne:

> *A real man would have stepped in and kicked Virgil's but so that he couldn't move the next day. Yes [Vida's action is motivated by Chi-Chi's comment] because right then she/he realized that Chi-Chi was right.*

Jaraf's (m) comments echo Miguel's suspicion that Vida reacts to Chi-Chi's gibe by hitting Virgil because it is the truth, but that hitting Virgil was nevertheless the right thing to do:

> *I think Chi-Chi is right about Vida not being able to cut it as a man, and I think she is angered so she takes it out on Virgil who deserves it.*

Juanito's (m) reading sees Vida's aggressive solution to Carol-Anne's problem as purely the effect of male hormones triggered by a confrontation between two males:

> *Chi-Chi made the testostrone build up and then Vida couldn't take it and solve the problem.*

Unlike responses such as the ones above, **Allison's (f)** reading explains Vida's behavior as a simple expression of friendship. It articulates Allison's empathy for Carol-Anne as arising from her own desire to be protected, should the need arise:

> *No, [Vida's action is not prompted by Chi-Chi's comment] I think Vida does this because her and Carol-Anne are friends and I'd hope that a friend would do that for me if I need them to.*

Alyssa (f) conjures up a shadowy and intriguing image of a younger Vida who may have shared Virgil's tendency to misuse her/his own (male) size and strength in abusive ways. Since then, Vida has learned to refuse/repress/sublimate this inclination to violence:

> *I think it shows enough how to be a real man. Thanks to Vida. I think what Chi-Chi said had a lot to do with Vida stopping Virgil. Cause maybe that's how Vida use to act.*

Aarron's (f) response to my questions about this scene makes a cryptic and intriguing conjecture about the reasons for the violence, beginning with an incomplete and puzzling thought and continuing with a series of pronouns that have no clear referents and which do not specify whether it was Vida or somebody else who was beaten by their father or who it was that covered up the abuse:

> *loyal to their wife/girlfriend and treat them as you would want to be treated back. No, because his father use to hit him and he would cover it up by excuses.*

Femininity: Girls just want to have fun

I selected the above scenes in order to direct students' attention to the way the movie defines and constructs the notion of masculinity. I also selected several scenes that, in my view, invite viewers to accept, enjoy, and identify with a variety of female characters. (scenes IV, V, and VII). The drag queens, Carol-Anne, Bobby-Lee, Beatrice, and the other ladies of Snydersville seem to me deliberately created to flesh out the movie's arbitrary and reductive classification system whereby representatives of the broad sub-category "woman" can be easily recognized and sorted by types. As with the male characters, it was readily apparent that most students enjoyed, sympathized with, and were thoroughly implicated in what I see as a very distorted and limiting vision of femininity offered by the movie. However, as with their readings of the male characters, students' reposes to the suggested prompts indicated that they approached the movie with a wide range of identifications, emotional investments, anxieties, and desires which guaranteed that their readings would be anything but cookie-cutter duplicates of one another.

In the first of these scenes, the drag queens visit Jimmy-Joe's café. They talk with Beatrice and the other ladies who are there working on posters for the strawberry social, a highlight of the town's social calendar, which is scheduled to take place that Sunday. The conversation turns to clothes, hairstyles, and a curious custom among the wealthy called "a girl's day out." When Myrna introduces herself as the owner of the town's beauty parlor, the drag queens persuade the women to let them revamp their hair and makeup. They then visit the town's general store, where Noxeema discovers a cache of vintage

Provoking Student Responses

The seven scenes and the prompts that I asked students to respond to were as follows:

Scene I: Just after they leave New York, the three drag queens stop at Vida's parents home. Vida's mother comes out, stops short, and seems to recognize her son. Vida tentatively smiles and waves at the woman, but she chooses to ignore him. Turning her back, she goes into the house and shuts the door.

How did this scene make you feel?

Why is this scene important in terms of the themes of love and acceptance that run through the movie?

What does Vida do immediately after her/his mother goes inside and before they drive away?

Why is this scene important to the plot of the movie?

Scene II: Sheriff Dollard ("Dullard") stops the drag queens and gives them a hard time. He tells Vida that where they are now, people don't go for "white girls ridin' around with niggers and spics" and tries to molest her, telling her that she wants what all girls want. Vida knees him in the crotch and he falls and strikes his head on the pavement.

What does the way he treats Vida tell us about the kind of a man he is?

Scene III: Chi Chi goes off by herself and runs into the town "tough boys." They threaten her, but Bobby-Ray pulls up in his pickup and rescues her.

In what ways is Bobby-Ray different from the sheriff, Virgil, and most of the other "straight" white men that live in Snydersville?

Scene IV: The drag queens talk with Beatrice and the other ladies in Snydersville about the strawberry social, and then about a day out with the girls. They visit the beauty parlor, where the drag queens give them all beauty makeovers.

What does this scene seem to be saying about what girls and women are like, and what they are interested in? How do the ladies appear to feel about being made more beautiful?

Scene V. Carol-Anne (Virgil's wife) is not with the other ladies that afternoon. When they return, Vida walks into Carol-Anne's kitchen and finds her crying for the second time. Vida says "Hon, do you, like, ever <u>not</u> cry in this room?"

What does this scene tell you about Carol-Anne? What kind of woman do you think she is supposed to represent?

Scene VI. Chi-Chi is smitten with Bobby-Ray, but Vida tells Chi-Chi to leave him alone. Chi-Chi tells Vida angrily "Vida, you know you're not a queen 'cause you rule people or you sit on a throne, baby. You're a queen 'cause you couldn't cut it as a man, so you had to put on a dress—that's why." As Vida gets up, her wig gets caught and pulled off. She/he goes into Virgil and Carol-Anne's room where Virgil is hitting Carol-Anne, punches Virgil and throws him out in the street.

What do you think this scene intends to show about how a "real man" should behave? Do you think that what Chi Chi says is the reason that Vida decides to make Virgil stop hitting Carol-Anne?

What do you think about the way that Carol-Anne behaves in this scene? Is she a strong, independent woman? How would most woman behave in this kind of a situation, and why?

Scene VII. Vida, Noxeema, and Chi Chi show Bobby-Lee how to dress and wear make-up. They have her watch Anne Baxter in "The Ten Commandments" for lessons in how to attract a man's attention.

What do you think about the definition of how to be a "real girl" and how to catch a man as presented in this scene? Do you agree with this image of what a woman should be like?

The Range of Responses: Homophobia to Empathy

"What if your child turned gay wouldn't you react the same way?"

Only three responses, all male, sympathize with the mother, but these three are vehement in their disapproval of Vida. **Doc (m)** says:

> *I feel sorry for the mother because her son is a Freak. His mom doesn't acceptate it. that doesn't mean she doesn't still love him. If he had the guts he would go see his family . And try and work things out.*

Doc's reading does not incorporate textual "evidence" that, if attended to, might temper his disapproval of Vida or support a contradictory reading which would suggest that by making this side-trip, Vida proves that she does have "the guts" to "go see his family and try and work things out." It seems to me that these comments do more that simply defend Vida's mother; they attribute feelings to both characters that support and rationalize Doc's antipathy toward a man who dresses and behaves like a woman. **Jaraf (m)** agrees with Doc's assessment of Vida but his comments add an element of physical revulsion which hints at a state of extreme anxiety:

> *"Sick. I can picture a mother disgusted at that. How could any guy do that?... Because Vida's mother does not accept her son for what he is. I wouldn't either."*

In contrast to these openly expressive responses, **Miguel's (m)** denies that the scene elicits any feeling. This emotionally neutral stance is undercut, however, by a question, posed directly to his audience (me?), which seems designed to solicit support, agreement, and/or approval for what appears to be a decidedly defensive reaction:

> *Well, it doesn't make me feel much because what if your child turned gay wouldn't you react the same way?... Because it shows how much gay people are un loved and unaccepted in this movie... Her mother goes in and really seems disgusted that her son/whatever showed up at the door and vida seemed heartbroken so she tears up the map and i believe lets fate decide her path.*

This response begins with a simple statement which quickly turns back on itself, becoming a question, a plea for agreement, or possibly an indirect apology. In doing so, it belies the indifference it professes and suggests the presence of some degree of conflict and ambivalence.

1960's clothing. The women emerge from the store, transformed and beaming, with an audacious new attitude.

Students did "get" what I take to be the movie's overt messages about the pride, confidence, and self-esteem that can accompany a decision to take more care with one's appearance. They also drew some rather unexpected conclusions about the reasons that the women are so grateful for the drag queen's fashion expertise and what they are thinking and feeling about their new and improved selves. These conclusions, following from the preconceptions and assumptions that they drew on to fill in the gaps and to create a coherent narrative around the images and dialogue on the screen interest me a great deal more than their attempts to articulate the movie's themes or to summarize its moral truisms.

Alyssa's (f) response, for example, includes a parenthetic reference that I believe could be an entry point for the student (alone, with classmates, and/or a teacher) to a significant discussion of how/why she arrived at this interpretation, whether an interpretation involves some responsibility, and where she might take her reading from here:

> *It says the girls are nothing like the guys. They aren't interested in what they want, they are interested in what makes them happy. (Not in the sick way). It makes them feel good about themselves.*

Raine's (f) comments on the scene appear to both affirm and challenge what she reads as the movie's offering of a self-evident and unproblematic truth about women. It may not be true that all women are preoccupied with appearance, or that such a preoccupation is necessarily a good thing, but for these women, the change appears to be a healthy one:

> *This scene makes it look like all women are interested in being beautifull and classy. After the ladies became more beautifull, they gain more confidence and feel way better on the Inside.*

Ozzie's (f) response is very similar in its assessment of the women's reasons for being delighted with their new clothing, makeup, and hair styles, but creates an interesting dimension to the film by suggesting that the women, prior to this scene, were not simply unaware of or uninterested in their appearance but were actively concealing a more authentic and attractive identity beneath their dowdy exteriors:

Women are interested in making themselves pretty and it makes the ladies feel more confident about themselves instead of hiding themselves and have low self-esteem.

In spite of the conversation between Vida and Beatrice in which a gossipy but charitable Beatrice briefly sketches a colorful, unconventional, and troubled history for each of the women, **Miguel (m)** chooses the word "boring" to describe them. He expresses what may be either disinterest, disdain, or puzzlement about the women's inner lives:

What they are like is they seem to be really boring. and what they're interested in i'm still really not to sure about it.

Viper (m) also concludes that the women lead joyless, unadventurous lives, which appears in this reading to be equated with conformity and tradition. I found this interesting because in my view, these women are highly eccentric, and although they do appear to be naïve, unworldly, or even emotionally immature, they appear to me to be almost anything but traditional:

It seems these women are too in touch with tradition. the laddies feel more free, more wild and they like it. They never have any fun and do daring things.

Mustang's (f) comments use very similar language to describe the sense of daring, freedom, and exhilaration around adopting a different style, which seems to be, for these women, a big risk:

It is saying these girls/women don't dress up or put on makeup or they don't know anything about it. It's like they are boring but they want to explore wild times but they don't know how. They feel really good about themselves.

Curtis (m) also appears to enjoy the women's delight, but his remarks convey a very different affective impression of the scene:

I think it is saying that girls are like women. They never grow out of dressing up and getting made over. I think the ladies liked it. ~~They~~ each one of them were smiling after they had there hair done.

In this reading, the women's new image becomes not a matter of risk-taking and personal growth but a matter of proving that women are just girls, bigger but still cute and inconsequential, who take a childish delight in playing dress-up.

Allison (f) assesses the women and describes their function in the film in a manner that hints at some measure of feminist indignation with the way the movie portrays them as representatives of their sex:

> *This scene trying to make it look like women are just there to look good. the ladies feel great even though they didn't before.*

While it critiques, on an intellectual level, what it sees as the movie's objectification of women, Allison's response also seems to me to accept and enjoy, on another level, the movie's equation of a more attractive self-image with happiness.

Aarron's (f) response is the only one to explicitly identify what, it seems to me, is one of the most powerful attractions of this scene for many young female viewers, whether or not the desire which underlies this attraction is rationally justifiable or proper. It names the connections between looking young and beautiful and feeling attractive to the opposite sex, a desire which drives a multibillion-dollar fashion and beauty industry:

> *They all like doing things together like getting their hair done. They like it because they think that the appears they look will attract other men to them making them feel younger again.*

It seems to me that Aarron's comments, although they may appear to be trite, obvious, or even careless observations about an unchallenging text, could in fact represent a rich opportunity. Rather than stopping with the almost pedestrian truth that media images often perpetuate repressive images of women, it seems to me that responses such as this one could be used to encourage students to think about how our unconscious fantasies and desires cause us to actively implicate ourselves in these same limiting and repressive images. I believe, as do many feminist authors, that the only route to real and lasting change lies directly through a difficult terrain riddled with the landmines of our own unconscious fantasies, desires, and investments which very often work to keep us enmeshed in the very structures that we might consciously despise and reject. Jean Wyatt is one author who articulates this position very persuasively.[6]

"The Battered Wife"

When asked to comment on Carol-Anne's behavior and her role in the film, it seems to me that once again most students accept the character in the spirit in which the movie seems to offer it. Once again, their reactions to Carol-Anne's predicament are

predictable, correct, and not remarkably deep or insightful. And once again, I find myself fascinated by the variety of tints and hues with which students draw these scenes in their imaginations and to (re)present them. **Raine's (f)** response is one that encapsulates Carol-Anne's character and her role in the plot succinctly and unsparingly:

> *"The battered wife" A wife that listens to her husband and does whatever he says. Carol-Anne is an abused woman but doesn't think she could do any better than Virgil.*

The quotation marks may indicate that "the battered wife" is not Raine's original phrase, and possibly not one that she would accept or use. It may be that Raine sees the term as shorthand for a stock character created by the self-help industry, tabloid journalism, and made-for-television movies. It seems that for Raine, it is not a novel or surprising thought that, on some level, the reason that Carol-Anne is abused is that she expects no better. **Alyssa's (f)** comments are less certain about Carol-Anne's role in the dynamic but just as certain that her low self-esteem contributes to the problem:

> *Carol-Anne gets abuside by her husband. Her husband has total control over her. She is suppose to represent a lady who is shy, abuside, and totally feels bad about herself, like what use to happen in the old days, I guess.*

Alyssa's reading appears to distance and soften the impact of spousal abuse in these scenes by firmly positioning it as a historical problem. It then further widens the emotional distance between Carol-Anne's situation and contemporary life by arguing that her fear and paralysis are exceptional and that most women would solve this problem easily:

> *She was panicing, I think she was so scared of being hit she couldn't find a way out of this situation. They [other women] would [not?] be anything like this, they would stand up for themselves or tell someone who would help.*

Several students seem to share Alyssa's view that Carol-Anne is weak and at least partly to blame for Virgil's abuse, while at the same time they communicate sympathy and an appreciation for the psychological complexities of living in such a relationship. **Ozzie's (f)** comments, for example, highlight the tendency of the woman who is being battered to denigrate and blame herself and to believe that the abuse is somehow deserved:

This scene tells you about Carol-Anne is a woman that have low self esteem. She blames herself for everything that happens. And ~~she~~ Carol-Anne kind of thought that Virgil hit her for a good cause.... Carol-Anne is not a strong, independent women. Many independent woman would not behave like this. The not so strong and independent type would blame themselves for everything that happens.

Aarron's (f) response points out how the uncertainty and fear surrounding irrational, arbitrary acts of cruelty can become an entrenched and crippling behavioral style when the victim learns that there is no logical correlation between his/her behavior and the intensity of the abuser's reaction:

She doesn't want anybody to interfere in the problem because Virgil will hit her even more. No she ain't because she's scared. Scared and afraid because of the temper there husband.boyfriend's acting because they might kill them.

Aarron seems to understand a view of the world in which it is impossible to predict when an incident, no matter how trivial, may spark a childish temper tantrum, physical violence, or even death. The confused and fragmented nature of the last thought, which is not a sentence, may be an indication of nothing other than simple haste or carelessness, but it might also signal that thinking about this scene causes some degree of anxiety or distress.

Cosmo (m) also acknowledges that a fear like Carol-Anne's may be immobilizing. Unlike Alyssa, he doesn't judge Carol-Anne to be weaker or more timid than most women, but he does decide that she was wrong to remain in her marriage:

Carol-Anne should have left Virgil, but instead she's too scared to leave him. Most women would probably act the same way because they're afraid of being hurt, even though it happens anyway.

Cosmo seems to find some irony in Carol-Anne's impossible choice; she will be hurt no matter which course of action she chooses.

Mercedes (f) seems to appreciate how bleak Carol-Anne's life is largely because of the contrast between her situation and her daughter's prospects for future happiness with Bobby-Ray:

Carol-Anne seems to be unhappy and miserable in her marriage. Carol-Anne looks like she represents a made or slave for her husband. Her daughter is finding happiness with Bobby-Ray but it seems to be a totally different relationship than what her mother has.... She acts like she needs her husband As if it was her fault that he is beating her. some women would be strong but if they have always relied on someone they will act the same way as Carol-Anne did.

Her response interprets the scene with some appreciation of the psychological complexity and the co-dependent nature of an abusive relationship.

Adrian's (f) response concurs with Cosmo's in defining Carol-Anne's passivity as weakness and this weakness as typical of a woman in her situation. In this view, however, Carol-Anne's fear is for Vida's safety as much as her own:

She is scared, doesn't want Vida to get hurt. She is weak if she was strong she would have left him a long time ago. Most women keep quiet like her because they fear their husbands.

Tina-Jo's (f) remarks, on the other hand, seem to work at understanding and constructing Carol-Anne in a very different way. In this reading, Carol-Anne is nervous and frightened, but she is not passive or weak, although her activity and her efforts apparently have little effect on her situation:

Carol-Anne has to stick up for herself a lot (or try to). She is a strong person but she can't show it because of Virgil. She is a very shook up and scared person. She represent a women who is in a bad situation and needs to get out. She is scared and does not want Virgil to hurt her anymore

Theresa (f) echoes Tina-Jo's suspicion that Carol-Anne is a more complex character than her behavior might suggest. This response seems acutely aware that the movie is a fiction, and that although Carol-Anne's behavior may be timid and submissive, who she is may not be identical with the role she plays in her marriage and/or in the movie.

Carol-Anne is a mother that is getting abused by her husband She seems to feel a lot of pain and discomfort for herself. She scared of her husband and most of her surroundings. I think she is supposed to represent a housewife that can't do anything right for her husband. (in the movie).... I think that Carol-

Anne behaves differently in the scene (to protect herself) She is a strong person and independent. Most women wouldn't let their husbands alone, because their afraid of them.

Tommy's (m) response springs to Carol-Anne's defense, adopting what I hear as a hushed, almost reverential tone that seems oddly exaggerated and out of place in connection with this movie:

This scene tells us that Carol-Anne is a fragile person who should be treated like a priceless plate, not Virgil's punching bag. Carol-Anne is suppose to represent a caring and loving house wife where she is not entitled to have a life, she is suppose to be a loner.

Comments such as Tommy's were very clear that Virgil was the villain in this relationship. Others were more inclined to cast Carol-Anne in a negative light even when they agreed that he was a brute and her situation was insufferable. **Allison (f)**, for example, describes Carol-Anne in extremely unsympathetic terms:

Carol-Anne seems to represent the "old hag" that always stays inside and insociable.

Juanito's (m) description is less colorful that Allison's, but it seems to draw on the same image of the drab, uninspirited housewife who is so boring and so weak that some might even say she provokes the abuse she gets:

She is representing a normal housewife. The one that always cooks and cleans every day, never goes out to enjoy herself.... They would just leave and move on. She is weak and has no one to go to for help.

Viper's (m) language is even more dismissive than Juanito's. Although Virgil's behavior is reprehensible, Carol-Anne has a responsibility to believe in herself and challenge Virgil when he is wrong:

Carol-Anne always takes Virgil's crap and does nothing to stand up for herself. She a woman that think her husband should be right and have no say in the matter.... She behaves like someone who can't do much obviously but then she turns out to be a strong independent women. most women would be scared and go back to their man.

Viper appears to be impressed by a scene, late in the movie, in which Carol-Anne makes it very clear that no matter how apologetic and chastened Virgil is, she will not go back to him and will not tolerate any more abuse.

Curtis's (m) response disapproves, in principal, of men who hit women, but adopts a posture which judges Carol-Anne as inadequate in both intelligence and backbone. This reading seems to accept wife-battering as an inevitability in much the same way that Carol-Anne does, offering very little hope of ending the cycle of abuse and despair:

> *I think she is stupid. She just stands there getting beaten up and then when Vida comes to help, she asks her to leave. I think most will probably do the same thing Carol-Anne did. I don't agree with a man hitting a woman, but that's what I think will happen.*

"To Wong Foo," as I read it, reinforces the kind of fatalistic thinking that this response illustrates. The movie, on a surface level, is all about hope, transformation, and salvation. On another level, however, it reinforces the cycles of abuse, poverty, racism, and despair that it points to because, in the world that the movie creates, change is a supernatural and fickle phenomenon or a divine intervention, rather than the result of hard-won wisdom or human agency. As Vida says, gazing lovingly from a balcony at a fairy-tale street scene aglow with colored lights and romantic music, "Sometimes, all it takes is a fairy."

Stu Cazzo's (m) comments raise the issue of sexual coercion/violence as an important element within the larger problem of spousal abuse:

> *She cannot not be as free as the other girls because Virgil will hit her if the supper is not made to perfection and she has to sleep with him when he wants. She is supposed to represent a housewife.*

Marylin Manson (m) is the only other student who appears to make this connection, although he does so much more obliquely. His comments on this scene conclude with a statement that sounds to me very much like anti-feminist rhetoric which warns that men should be afraid because the worm has turned and women now have the upper hand:

> *She is supposed to represent the housewife she is a old fashion girl who always has to satisfie her man and let him walk all over her like she a door mat.... I think Carolien is a weak a very non-independent woman most women*

would probably go but the same way that she did but know it's the ninetys and women stand up more for them selves. but sometimes they take it to far to.

Ninja's (m) response is similar to others that appear to be skeptical about the existence of spousal abuse on the one hand and surprised at the prevalence of a "victim mentality" among women on the other:

It tells me she is a very unhappy woman and is supposed to represent being the husband victim.... The way Carol-Anne behaves in this scene is not strong & independent but surprisingly lots of women would have done the same thing.

Miguel's (m) reaction to this scene was very similar to his responses to other texts. He seemed to me to approach his reading with an attitude composed of equal parts honesty, naïveté, charity, and skepticism. His appraisal of Carol-Anne is not nearly as judgmental or as dismissive as some of the responses (mostly male, although not exclusively) that we see above:

She seems to represent a hard-working kind of woman. she also seems to be a very intelligent woman as well. although these clips are sort of — .
Yes she is a strong and very independent woman. I think that most women would freak. but I have never known a woman that was beating.

Miguel is one of the few students who cheerfully admitted to being mystified by the intricacies of male-female relations and curious about how the female mind works.

"It kinda makes her look a little like a slut"

The last scene that I asked students to comment on is a scene in which the three drag queens direct Bobby-Lee's metamorphosis from ingenuous woman-child/tomboy to artful seductress. For the most part, students reacted quite negatively, as I did, to the image of a sweet, fresh-faced teenager being taught how to look and behave unnaturally (and much older than her years) in order to attract Bobby-Ray's attention. It seems to me that up to this point, the movie unapologetically proclaims the message that style is everything and still manages to avoid being offensive. When it suggests, however, that the Bobby-Lee who greets Bobby-Ray after her makeover is an improvement over her former self, it stretches the bounds of my patience and good will, and it appeared to do the same for

Alyssa (f). She says "it" (Bobby-Lee's new look? The drag queens' instruction? The scene? The movie?) is "degrading:"

> *I think she looked good but I think it is a little degrading cause she's only like 13 or something and she wear heals and stuff. It kinda makes her look a little like a slut. I guess in my words she got to do everything just to get a guy. stoop low measures. No, be herself and a guy who can accept that is the one for you. I think Vida, Chi Chi, Noxemma, dressed Bobby-Lee in the guy's point of view.*

Alyssa points out that while the drag queens present themselves as women and as experts in women's hairstyles, makeup, fashion, and "the moves," they are not women, and they do not see Bobby-Lee from a female perspective. In fact, they share an unenlightened and decidedly male view of feminine beauty.

Mustang's (f) comments echo Alyssa's indignation, as did most responses. The confusing use of masculine and feminine pronouns in these remarks may well be a reflection and a continuation of the confusion around sex/gender that permeates the students' discussions and the movie itself:

> *I think [this scene is] insulting to ladies because it is saying if you don't put on a nice, short dress or do your makeup or hair men will not be attracked to you. I mean what does a dress, made up, hair have to do with who you are. What's inside is what ~~conceal~~ counts. She Bobby-Ray liked Chi Chi because of the way she looked. He didn't know much about Chi Chi, so he did not know how he felt about being a female. If he would try to learn more about her them being attracked to her just because of her looks.*

I find Mustang's final two statements particularly interesting because she was the only student who expressed an interest in the relationship between Bobby-Ray and Chi Chi.

Marylin Manson's (m) response to the film is annoyance, because, in his view, it overestimates the role that physical appearance plays in sparking a relationship, but also (and possibly more importantly) because Bobby-Ray sees Bobby-Lee as second prize:

> *I totally disagree with all of this because a person should like another person for who they are not what they are and what they look like and another reason why Billy-Ray goes for Bobby-Lee is because Bobby-Ray got shout down by*

Chi Chi and was hurt so he went to bobby-lee because he was hurt and whent to the next think next to a companion.

It seems to me that these remarks are a self-conscious attempt to defend all males against charges that they see no further than teeth, hair, cleavage, and other obvious signals of a woman's sexual availability. **Adrian's (f)** comments, on the other hand, accept that this attitude has become a stereotype precisely because, sadly, men so often think this way:

It is actually true. Men don't notice girls unless they look totally awesome i mean make-up, dress, hair, everything. I think men should notice women & like them for their personality not just their looks.

It seems to me that if a tactful, caring teacher were to encourage Adrian to spend some time exploring her reading, she might notice and be willing to reconsider both the extensive life experience and the mind-reading ability that her sweeping statement assumes. **Mercedes' (f)** comments argue essentially the same point, but they are quite different from Adrian's in that they appear to invest the woman with the power to shape and control how men see her:

That to be a real girl you have to dress slutty or show off your body so a guy could notice you. I totally disagree with this image it makes women look fake like they are only putting on an act to impress a guy. A guy should like you for who you are not by what you are wearing.

Theresa's (f) reading is unique in several respects. She also appears to give men credit for being able to see beyond superficial beauty. In her view, the danger lies not in valuing the exterior trappings of femininity, but in overvaluing them or adopting them blindly:

A real girl should be kind, sweet, and hard to get, that's how Bobby-Ray was acting like. I don't think that in order to catch a man you have to put on a dress, do your hair, and wear make-up because its inside that counts. I think that women should be like that at a degree, not to go overboard like what Bobby-Ray was doing (she wasn't acting herself).

For **Tommy (m)**, as for most of these students, authenticity is apparently recognized as a primary virtue by "real" characters and "real" viewers, both male and female, who apparently appear more genuine in contrast to the drag queens, whose gender seems to consist of an artificial veneer of femininity bonded to a hollow core:

The definition is that Bobby-Ray is a real woman in comparison with Vida, Chi Chi, & Noxeema. No, because what they were showing was her outer beauty. You can tell if a woman is a "real woman" by their personality and the way they are (Inner beauty).

Tina-Jo (f) begins her response enigmatically, with an incomplete thought and a lower-case first letter. It is apparently intended to convey her scorn for what she sees as the movie's definition of alluring femininity:

real girl is to wear dresses and to put your hair up nice and add a little makeup to your face and you have got it made. No I don't you shouldn't have to get all fancyed up just for a guy to notice you should just be yourself and he should respect you for who you are and not what he wants you to be or dress like.

Cosmo (m) reiterates a position, in his own words, on which all of the students agree. It seems to me that his comments also point out, possibly unintentionally, the irony of his own statement, given the *mis en abyme* effect of the movie scene within a movie scene:

I don't think the clothes make the girl. I think it's their attitude ~~just because~~ if they've got on a beautiful gound ~~that dress~~ and they're attitude towards life in general sucks, that's what's ugly. That image was too much from the movies, but it's possible that women could be like that.

Jaraf's (m) response is much briefer and more direct than Cosmo's, speaking in a no-nonsense tone that to me sounds decidedly masculine and patriarchal:

I agree of what a woman should be like, and what a man should be like but I disagree with anybody disrespecting anyone else the moment she's not in a pretty dress.

His is the only male response that seems to fit this stereotypical, essentialist mold, and seems most closely related to the peremptory tone of **Ozzie's (f)** remarks:

Real girls should not dress up to just get noticed. They should try to get to know the guy and make this guy realize that he missed this girl and how he did that.

Conclusion

Students' comments about "To Wong Foo" told me that most of them had enjoyed the movie, but that several males had an intensely negative reaction. This reaction appeared to be linked to anxiety evoked by the transsexual characters in the movie. One of the fascinating themes that emerged for me was the ambivalence that these male students seemed to feel. On the one hand, these responses were sympathetic to the drag queens, who were perceived to be marginalized and lonely social misfits, and for Vida in particular, who is also rejected by her mother. At the same time, these responses are hostile toward male "freaks" who defy the norms of heterosexuality and masculinity. It was often difficult to distinguish which of these competing emotions was uppermost at a given moment.

This movie was the most obviously didactic of the texts I chose. Texts such as "The Little Prince," "Behind Times," and "Medea" also have an element of didacticism, but they embed the "message" in fantasy or humor, which, in my view, makes for a richer, more demanding engagement. It seems to me that psychoanalytic theories teach us that, contrary to what common-sense would suggest, good teaching practice does not necessarily involve presenting students with a story that has an uplifting and accessible lesson. Rather, psychoanalytic theories suggest that sometimes the best approach is the one Emily Dickinson recommends—"tell all the truth, but tell it slant/Success in Circuit lies."[7]

Notes: Chapter Eight

1 Because I believe it would be unnecessarily intrusive to use the combined masculine/feminine pronoun when referring to the drag queens throughout this paper, I will use either the masculine or the feminine form depending on how I believe an audience is most likely to perceive them at that point in the movie. In many cases, this will vary from scene to scene.

2 Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," 1996 (Originally published 1946).

3 See Melanie Klein, (1996), Joseph Sandler (1988), N. Gregory Hamilton, (1990).

4 Elizabeth Young-Bruehl and Faith Bethelard. *Cherishment: A Psychology of the Heart*, New York: Free Press, 2000.

5 Vida loses a shoe at the scene of her/his first encounter with Sheriff Dollard, and he spends the greater part of the movie trying to find the man who fits the shoe. In another scene, the three drag queens are

on a balcony overlooking a scene in which all the couples they have brought together are dancing in the street to the romantic music of an unseen band. They look very pleased with themselves, and Vida says "Sometimes it just takes a fairy."

[6] Jean Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire*, 1990

[7] Emily Dickinson, "Poem 1129," 1996.

responded to it. They appeared eager to describe how they fleshed out the story's skeletal structure to create their own fully-imagined narrative.

Several overarching themes emerged for me in reading students' responses to "The Little Prince" which connect them to one another and to some basic psychoanalytic concepts. Possibly the most striking of these is the degree to which students imagined and judged the king and queen as parents. Their responses to these two characters are, for the most part, highly charged with emotion, both positive and negative. They convey interest, approval, confusion, concern, irritation, anger, disappointment, resentment and/or anxiety, sometimes simultaneously. Many responses draw on an image of the mother as a phallic figure of supernatural proportions. She is perceived, or hallucinated, as either all-good and all-loving or cold, harsh, and unresponsive—sometimes both, alternately or simultaneously. Students' responses to the parents in "The Little Prince" convinced me that these powerful, hallucinatory images around our parents continue to play a crucial role in many reader-text exchanges long after our conscious minds construct more realistic images.

One argument which the text provoked centers around the respective roles of biology and sociology in parenting. Readers very often approach this question passionately and from diametrically opposed positions, particularly with respect to the mother's role. Some see the relationship between mother and child as almost purely innate and instinctual, while others view maternal behaviors as the malleable and contextual products of a socialization process that has little to do with the biological connection between mother and infant. Although the majority of students' responses invest the king/father with a great deal of symbolic and institutional power, most don't imbue him with the kind of emotional significance that the figure of the queen/mother evokes. Students appeared to be primarily interested in the king and his new wife as parents, rather than as husband or wife or as rulers of the kingdom, and they all used unique conceptions of the dynamics of power and gender within a marriage to fill in the gaps in order to create a narrative out of a very short text.

Another concern for students centers around the question of which child should be the next ruler. The text states that the queen's request for a competition to determine which child would succeed as ruler "could do no harm, and it would teach her a lesson." Some

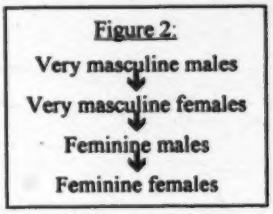
students dispute this statement, while others accept it as a statement of fact about the king's assumptions and about objective reality. In all cases, the text functioned as a forum for working out some difficult feminist issues rather than as a source of new knowledge or enlightenment about parents or about sex/gender.

While students, for the most part, agree that there is no logical argument to support the king's position, the power struggle over ascendancy in "The Little Prince" is nevertheless a deeply unsettling scenario for many. Some students heatedly defend the prince's claim to the throne as a male and as the king's firstborn. Others argue in his favor simply because maintaining the status quo causes less anxiety than adjusting to change. Change creates anxiety, and when justice and tradition collide, tradition will triumph. There is no precedent for the female-centered structure that the queen envisions and this is reason enough (for the citizens and for some of these students) to dismiss it. A third group of students argue just as heatedly in support of the queen's plan because the queen should protect and advance her daughter's interests, the king did agree to be bound by the outcome of the contest, and the princess was clearly the winner. For these students, the demands of justice and the rules of fair play outweigh the anxiety of challenging traditional power structures.

This text drew most students into a passionate debate around the notion of justice, no matter which position they adopt. Many students side with the queen when the question of a female monarch is debated hypothetically, but when the queen's plan throws a "real" family into turmoil and has real political repercussions, they become much less certain that she is right. Some manage their discomfort at recognizing the injustice of traditional sex/gender relations by dismissing it as a historical aberration with no contemporary relevance.

In general, both male and female students agree that women do not normally possess, and in fact are not "supposed to" possess the "masculine" qualities required in an effective head of state (presumably, qualities such as toughness, strength, and decisiveness). In the same way, men are not supposed to be sweet, gentle, or shy because these are female qualities and are despised in a ruler. The consensus, which is hotly opposed by a few vocal dissenters, is that a properly "masculine" man is the best choice for king. Based on these students' responses, the hierarchy of human beings based on

gender-linked characteristics, ranked in descending order of importance and value, might be represented by a very simple diagram (see figure 2).



The first two categories appear to be extremely stable, while the second two are much less rigid and often change places from one reading to another and within the same reading. As with their comments about the parent-child relationship, students were divided about whether these sex-linked traits are biologically innate or culturally conditioned.

As with other texts, some readers appear to run into problems because they have no means to read the story metaphorically or ironically. These readings accept the last sentence ("Order was restored and justice done") as a transparent statement of fact, causing readers to search for an explanation that would help to make sense of the assertion. In this view, a reader's job is to read closely and explicate the literal meaning of the text, a job which these students took seriously, even if it sometimes meant accepting ideas or attitudes that they might resist or reject in another context.

"Behind Times"

Rather than allowing students to respond freely as I had with "The Little Prince," I decided to focus their attention on certain aspects of "Behind Times" by asking them to respond to five prompts. It was not until much later that I realized what this would mean for my study in terms of reducing opportunities for the kinds of surprises that made students' responses to "The Little Prince" so interesting and so rewarding. This tension between being rigidly directive on the one hand and encouraging an undisciplined and unproductive anarchy in the classroom has always posed a problem for English teachers. However, as a result of my work with these students, I have become convinced that, at least initially, students would benefit immensely if we paid more attention to whatever it is that they want to say about a text and less attention to our own "teacherly" agenda based on what we feel students should attend to.

"Behind Times" is a more "realistic" text than "The Little Prince," which means that students did not offer the same kinds of fantasy-based readings that they did in response to "The Little Prince." "Behind Times" provides much more detail, and therefore limits the degree to which the text invites/allows a reader to use her/his imagination to construct

a narrative. I have therefore described it as a text which is more "closed" than "The Little Prince." The contrast between students' responses to the two texts was striking for me because it highlights the value of introducing fantasy-based genres in the classroom. Many authors have pointed to the subversive and transformational potential of magical realism, which students' responses to "Medea the Sorceress" demonstrate particularly clearly. Responses to "Behind Times" nevertheless demonstrated that even when the text is a more "closed" or realistic one, it still functions as an object onto which the reader projects an almost unlimited array of desires and anxieties.

Several motifs emerged as I studied student responses to "Behind Times." The first has to do with the language that students pressed into service to describe their reactions to the story. In some cases, they insistently repeat the same word or phrase; in other cases, word choices are entirely original. A close examination suggests that, very often, these choices may not signal laziness or the absence of engagement. Rather, they can be viewed as signaling students' awareness that language must always frustrate the demands that we make of it. As can be seen even more clearly in responses to "The Griesly Wife," students appear to instinctively utilize the multivalent, multivocal nature of words that are less specific and less constrained in the connotations attached to them.

The second concern focuses on the difficult and often superficial nature of communication between adolescents and their parents. Students are quick to discount an adult outsider who pretends to be an insider with respect to youth culture. Many are amused by the story but they are also contemptuous of both Stephen's parents and the author because they try too hard to be modish, "hip," and funny. An equal number of male and female students appear to be cynical and fearful about the dangers of dating and the risks attached to sexual relationships in the world of the nineties, but they are also deeply pessimistic about the possibility that somebody who grew up thirty or more years ago would have anything helpful or comforting to say to them. Another group of responses, fewer in number and predominantly by male students, show little evidence of this pessimism. Instead, these students seem to accept the story as an enjoyable, light-hearted parody. Both modes of response serve to manage similar fears about dating, sexuality, and personal safety. The first does so by admitting the difficulties but striving to construct a tough, cool persona—"sure, the world is a tough place, but I'm tougher."

The second does so by denying or minimizing the difficulties. These students approach, select, and reshape textual information in such a way as to make it less threatening.

The third dominant theme concerns students' attempts to evaluate whether the characters and the situation in the story are realistic or not. Students are quick to judge whether the behaviors and attitudes depicted in this story are appropriate or not based on their knowledge that boys and girls will exhibit very different feelings and behaviors in the same situation. Because they read "The Little Prince" as fantasy, students do not judge its characters as if they are real people to the same degree that they do with "Behind Times." Both male and female students spend a great deal of time discussing the ways in which the situation in the story does not reflect what they already know about parents, boys, girls, dating, and relationships. "Behind Times" is a story about contemporary teens and, as such, students scrutinize it carefully for any "mistakes" in representing how girls and boys act, react, and interact.

The students' fourth major concern centers around the very different ways that students visualize the incident on the dance floor described in "Behind Times." Responses demonstrate a variety of strategies for incorporating the resulting images into the students' own anxieties and fantasies around flirting, dating, sexual contact, sexual harassment, and rape. Although sexual orientation is never mentioned in this text, some students seem to assume that the perverse leap required to imagine a girl accosting a boy is not very different from that required to imagine one boy accosting another. Many responses reify the sexist idea that the recipient of an unwanted advance may not have monitored his/her own actions carefully enough, and may be sending out, either consciously or unconsciously, provocative signals or "vibes" that invite these advances.

This text, as with many student readings of all the texts, illustrates the manner in which a schooled, "politically correct" feminist reading can, with very little textual provocation and fueled by unconscious desires, turn in on itself to become covertly but decidedly sexist. Students understand that "Behind Times" is asking them to look at sexual harassment from an unconventional perspective, but they have only limited success in viewing the situation through the lens of irony. Just as students' comments about "The Little Prince" had done, their responses to "Behind Times" convinced me of the need for an approach that would help students to surface and examine the powerful

but subliminal affective charge connected to any text that amuses, pleases, irritates, angers, or moves them. *It seems to me that asking students to be more attentive to the moments in their reading that cause confusion, discomfort, or anxiety rather than encouraging them to further repress and disown them by engaging in superficial rhetoric about harmony, tolerance, and justice is our best hope of encouraging real and permanent attitudinal and affective changes.*

"Behind Times," for all its apparent simplicity, was a difficult text for a number of students to engage with. In some cases, this appeared to be because the student did not "get" the irony in the author's tone or the situation as he describes it, but in others, the problem appeared to stem from a resistance to handling a serious subject with humor rather than a grave sensitivity. In many classrooms, a text such as this one might be introduced to prompt a cursory discussion of the stylistic techniques of humor and journalism or to serve as a springboard for a lecture about the evils of sexual harassment and the importance of treating members of the opposite sex with respect, but it seems to me that we might encourage a more productive engagement if we first ask students to explore their own confused and confusing feelings about adolescent dating and sexual relationships.

For several students, the distance between good-natured flirting and date rape seemed to be a short one. It is this extreme divergence in attitude toward the scenario depicted in "Behind Times" that persuaded me to explore the notion of date rape with the help of psychoanalytic theories.[1] I have found these theories to offer a productive way of thinking about the hostility, whether manifest or latent, that seems to be an unavoidable element of sexual attraction. Problems surrounding sexuation and sexuality become more intelligible, if no more easily resolved, when we consider them from a psychoanalytic perspective.

"The Griesly Wife"

For the same reasons and in the same way that I had with "Behind Times," I chose to provide students with four fairly specific questions rather than allowing them to freely decide what they wanted to say in response to "The Griesly Wife." Even though I deliberately constructed prompts to be as open-ended as possible, asking for feelings and impressions rather than facts or conclusions, I was once again dismayed to consider after

the fact how much they limited the extent to which students were able to bring their own issues to the page.

The most striking aspect of students' responses to Manifold's poem, which is, I believe, deliberately cryptic and open-ended, is the degree of bewilderment that they express. Regardless of the cause of their confusion, responses to this text clearly demonstrate that when a reader is faced with a text which strikes them as difficult or ambiguous—when the text itself pushes itself to the forefront and demands attention rather than functioning as the invisible bearer of unproblematic meaning—the resulting emotion is quickly labeled pleasure or displeasure. Readers readily admitted being mystified about the poem's meaning, but most students willingly offered opinions about what it might mean and all reported an affective response which cannot be accounted for by a simple failure of comprehension.

Another feature of these responses that particularly interests me is the ways in which they contradict some of our common-sense assumptions about students' lack of discrimination and sophistication as textual consumers. Teachers very often complain that students enter a text, particularly on first reading, with a lack of awareness that the text is not an unmediated window on "the Truth," but is, instead, one arbitrary construction of the truth. That is, we lament the fact that students engage with the text entirely at the level of action and emotion, rather than doing the analytical work we would like them to do with it. Many conservative teachers, parents, and politicians worry that today's electronic games, movies, music videos, advertising, and television shows, particularly with respect to their escalation of the use of violence and special effects, have exaggerated this tendency in the extreme. The result, in this view, is that contemporary adolescents have become passive and undiscriminating consumers of "mind candy."

Student responses to the eight texts I had them look at have convinced me of the fallacy of this argument. Rather, I believe that students' unremitting exposure to a much broader array of fictional forms than their parents would have had access to has caused them to develop a very sophisticated and sometimes cynical awareness that a fictional text is a world created by an author. The volume (both in terms of number and decibels) of texts that compete for their attention means that most of these readers are cognizant that they must always decide whether to be co-opted into a textual world or to resist it.

Nor does it seem to me that students read "The Griesly Wife" with the kind of blasé indifference to violence that we are so often told is the outcome of popular culture media saturated with violent images. The few students who do adopt an attitude of delight at lurid images of a beastly metamorphosis and a murder seemed to me to do so in an obvious and self-conscious attempt to construct an acceptable image of themselves (an ideal ego), staking their claim on qualities such as worldliness and nonchalance.

A third aspect of these responses that particularly strikes me is the degree to which students adopted a vocabulary that is rife with cliches, understatement, and generalities when they encounter an unsettling image. When students hand us writing that relies on this kind of language, many English teachers unapologetically accuse them of lazy thinking or carelessness. We ask them to take the offending piece and "put a little bit more effort into it." We often ask students to probe and extend their thinking with respect to the text and/or the assignment, but we do not generally ask them to explore their original stance with respect to the text or their points of identification or resistance. It is, of course, entirely appropriate to continue our efforts to help students do more analytical thinking, but I believe it is also important to respect a process that often serves an important psychological purpose by helping the reader to manage or sublimate disturbing images and ideas.

Reader-response theorists have made valuable headway in ensuring that we no longer expect that two readers will arrive at identical readings of a text, but there is much work still to be done to ensure that we respect, explore, and value these readings for what they can tell us about ourselves rather than for what they can tell us about a theme, an issue, a genre, a historical period, or an author. Because student readings of "The Griesly Wife" vary so dramatically, to the point that some readers seemed to have copies of a different poem, I have gained a new appreciation for the project of asking students to explore the desires and the investments that undergird a reading. It is an admittedly difficult step, but nevertheless a crucial one, from there to helping them to assume responsibility for those readings.

A close look at the semiotic content of these differences underlines a fourth significant aspect of this set of responses. It becomes apparent that there is more going on between the reader and the poem than we might appreciate when we are satisfied with an

overly simplistic view of the meaning of reader-response theories and their implications for classroom practice. One translation of these theories that informs curriculum documents in Alberta, and which has found its way into the instructional and assessment strategies of many teachers, recognizes that individual readers inevitably bring unique background experiences and knowledge to a text, which means that every reader will interpret the text differently. Although proponents of this view recognize that readers will do very different things with a text, and will consequently align their interest and their sympathies differently, they very often work from an assumption that the text itself remains constant. English instruction, from this perspective, becomes a project of providing the information and resources that will enable students to arrive at an interpretation that most closely resembles the "best" or "correct" one. Teachers who adopt this approach can very often be heard admonishing students that they are entitled to their impression, feeling, or opinion, as long as they can "back it up," or validate it, with reference to the text, which is still viewed as the final authority. Students' responses to this poem, and to all of the texts that I asked them to read, force me to acknowledge that although the letters on the page in front of two readers may be the same, we can make very few claims about the text that would appear to be true for both readers.

Because readers' unconscious preconceptions do play a constitutive role in shaping the very texts they read, there is little uniformity or predictability about which protagonist a student will find more sympathetic. Neither male nor female students seem inclined to identify or sympathize with a character purely on the basis of sex/gender. Many responses appear to imagine the wife as an inhuman monster, but just as many are entirely sympathetic to an abused young wife who, if she does attack her husband, is quite justified in doing so. It became increasingly evident throughout my reading of students' responses to all of the texts that there is very little "natural" affinity or identification on the basis of sex/gender. When students do align themselves with the protagonist of the same sex/gender to argue for their particular position in the gender wars, they do so in ways that, to me, do not always seem to go very deep. This surface or "learned" response often seemed to be in conflict with more primary investments, resistances, and desires that students cannot, do not, or choose not to acknowledge or understand.

The language that students choose in their comments about "The Griesly Wife" does much more than simply translate a thought, feeling, or impression into words. Rather, words seem to me to be chosen for the power they have to construct one version of reality while denying or repressing another. Responses to this poem, in particular, have caused me to rethink what I have long held to be the value of encouraging students to strive for greater precision and more elaboration in their compositions—to keep searching for the perfect word or phrase to encapsulate a thought. When students do not feel constrained by evaluation or by a teacher's expectation that they should revise, refine, and elaborate, which was my intention in the context of my study, they tend to employ words that, to a teacher with a healthy respect for the craft of writing, seem to be thoughtlessly chosen, overused, and in many ways, empty of meaning.

I wondered whether this tendency could be ascribed entirely to a desire to avoid the effort of searching for a more precise or appropriate word or phrase, or if apparently "lazy" choices may also be the result of a more complex strategy whereby students actively and deliberately make linguistic choices that teachers and parents may not appreciate. This line of thought led me to consider the function of slang in an adolescent's vocabulary and the ways in which it serves to subvert adult power structures, which adolescents often perceive as a challenge to their independence and individuality. They may use slang as a way to let others know that they can and will resist adult pressures to conform to the adult world by adopting what they consider to be "adult-speak." Another possible explanation aside from laziness or lack of verbal intelligence, however, has to do with a desire to exploit the very "emptiness" of these word choices—that is, students' desire to *not* exclude any of the range of possible meanings and associations connected with a thought or an image by choosing a word that automatically limits these possibilities.

If I were to place student responses to "The Griesly Wife" along a continuum, as described above, from a more fully articulated and more precise use of language at one extreme end to a more spare and oblique style at the other, I would find a slightly larger proportion of female responses fall toward the former pole and more male responses toward the latter. I would also say that on the whole, the girls' responses showed a greater interest in characters and their relationships, while boys showed a slightly greater

tendency to involve themselves in the plot. This being said, my reading of these responses complicates and throws into question the project of striving to identify defining traits or essential differences in male and female psychology from an object relations perspective of sexuation.

"Medea The Sorceress"

To introduce "Medea the Sorceress," I reverted to the strategy I used with "The Little Prince." I passed out a copy of the poem and read it aloud twice. I then passed out a second copy of the poem, without questions or prompts, which was interspersed with white space for written response. Once again, I was pleased with students' responses and also interested to note which aspects of the poem they pointed to as interesting, pleasing, frustrating, or worrisome. My interpretation of these responses has concerned itself more with attempting to follow the thought processes of individual students as they make their way through the poem rather than with synthesizing these readings on the basis of connecting themes. In this section, however, I will try to recap some of the themes that did emerge.

One of the prominent features of students' comments had to do, once again, with the parent-child relationship. "Medea the Sorceress" introduces the question of the responsibilities and the power that accompany parenthood on two levels—the pregnant girl becomes a mother while she is still a child herself, at least in the view of many of these students. Feelings of abandonment and rejection run through the text for many of them. The girl is abandoned by her boyfriend, forced to come to terms with a pregnancy without his support. She is alone in the home for unwed mothers rather than with her parents because, as many students read the poem, they have disowned her and sent her away, not because they were trying to do the best thing for her. The pregnant teen may have had an abortion already, or may have given birth and given up her child. The poem is structured around references to Medea, who slew her own two children in a fit of murderous jealousy and whom the students understand as cruel, evil, and psychotic rather than betrayed and troubled.

Some students imagine the events described in the poem entirely from the perspective of the infant, who, in this view, is denied the basic human right to be wanted and received into a secure home by two loving parents. Many students expressed bewilderment at

being asked to consider the possibility that a parent (either the girl herself, as a mother, or her parents) may choose to behave toward a child with selfishness, cruelty, or indifference. Running through responses to all of these texts is a romanticized, anxious, and/or defensive vision of parenthood, which deliberately strives to construct/reinforce an illusion that all parents are unselfish and loving towards their children.

Students also show a great deal of interest in questions of guilt and blame in connection with the poem. Their responses indicate that the poem provoked a tension between viewing right and wrong as relative and contextual and the desire to imagine moral values as a comfortingly defined and unequivocal set of rules. There were very few students who did not take the scenario in the poem very seriously. Most of these young people are well aware that to be young, unmarried, and responsible for a new life would be a crushing responsibility. The sense that irresponsible sexuality may have awesome repercussions permeates responses to "Medea the Sorceress" in a much more pronounced way than it does responses to the other four texts I have considered here, which causes students to pass often harsh judgements on the party that they deem most irresponsible, whether this is the girl, her boyfriend, the girl's parents, the other pregnant girls in the home, or somebody else. It seems quite clear that these judgements are influenced by forces of which the student is not consciously aware, and are not entirely products of rational, logical, internally consistent thinking.

A third striking feature of this set of responses is the degree to which they exhibit a strategy that many readers adopt to help them manage what they hear as a strident feminist message or a political statement. **Adrian (f)** neatly encapsulates this strategy when she says that the woman in the poem "should speak for herself." It seems that for some young readers, being asked to consider questions of morality and justice in the abstract is a daunting task, and one that they may evade altogether or reframe by restating the question in more immediate and personal terms. They may feel capable of assimilating, making sense of, or taking responsibility for deciding what one particular pregnant young woman should or should not do or say, but not to form decontextualized, abstract theses about issues as complicated as those the poem introduces. It seems crucial to me that we recognize and create opportunities for affective engagement with the

concrete images that a text evokes and which, according to many theorists, are prerequisite to the kind of abstract thinking that we want to help students develop.[2]

Because it touches on issues that are extremely significant to high school students, this poem highlights some areas in which students' reasoned, logical conceptions of sex roles and sexual relationships conflict with images and feelings that are deeply embedded in traditional sexist views of the "normal" and "natural" differences in male and female views of these roles and relationships. In many cases, one portion of a response articulates one position while another portion contradicts or undermines it.

A fifth feature of these responses that particularly interests me is the great variety of approaches and strategies which individual students employ, with varying degrees of success, to accommodate the abrupt shift in the poem away from the prosaic reality of the pregnant young woman's plight. Some students react with disappointment, discomfort, and hostility; some appear to be pleased by the poem's more fantastic and logically irreconcilable elements; and others accept references to the sorceress and her vengeful slaughter of her own two children as flat statement of fact. This last position appeared to present particular difficulties for the students who adopted it but most students revealed some degree of discomfort or tension.

It seems to me that this tension is, for many students, a productive one. Responses to this poem, as they had with "The Griesly Wife," underscore the resistance with which some students approach a genre that asks them to set aside what they know to be true and possible and to imaginatively enter a "what if" world. Many students point out that they pride themselves on being rational (Miguel says "maybe im too logical") and on having outgrown the childish world of fairy tales and make-believe. I agree with theorists who argue that an ability to occasionally doff the blinkers of science, logic, and common sense, can be a radically liberatory experience, allowing us to see and imagine a world filled with possibilities rather than one bounded by impossibilities.

If one adopts the view that one of the desired ends of English Language Arts instruction is that students will interrogate, learn from, and when necessary, dwell on their own affective engagement with a text, then questions around assessment and evaluation, already extremely troublesome, will necessarily become even more difficult. When I consider the complexity, the honesty, and the richness of students' responses to

Chapter Nine: Conclusions, Implications, Suggestions for Further Research

In the following chapter, I will attempt to do three things: 1) encapsulate what for me are some of the most significant ideas that emerged from students' responses to each text, 2) consider the more general implications of students' responses to these texts for classroom literature instruction, and 3) suggest some ways in which future research could build on this project to extend our understanding of adolescents and the ways in which the difficult processes of sexuation and identity consolidation are worked on, and partially worked out, in the texts that students meet.

There are several choices that I made and adhered to throughout my discussion of the ways in which these twenty-six students responded to five different texts. Each time I introduced a student pseudonym for the first time in relation to a different text, I placed (m) or (f) after the pseudonym to remind the reader that the student was male or female, and set this letter, along with the pseudonym, in a bold font. I felt that it was important to identify the student each time I cited a comment—I did not want to risk losing individual students' voices by synthesizing their comments into an amalgam of anonymous generalizations. However, encountering a long series of names may present difficulties for a reader which I hoped to minimize by setting the names in a distinctive font. I hope that over the course of my discussion, comments made by students about all five texts will have cohered into twenty-six mini-portrait of twenty-six unique and interesting individuals. I have reproduced students' responses on computer as closely as possible to their handwritten originals. I decided that it would be unnecessarily intrusive to indicate each time that I transcribed an unconventional spelling, punctuation, etc. as it appears in the student's original, but I have indicated any additions, deletions, or changes that I made to the original.

Conclusions

"The Little Prince"

When I was initially weighing the merits of various texts for the purposes of my study, I hesitated about choosing "The Little Prince " because I worried that students might dismiss it as a children's fairy-tale and refuse to consider it seriously. I was extremely pleased, however, with the enthusiasm and diligence with which they read and

"Medea," the importance of the issues it causes students to explore, and my suspicion that any attempts on my part to evaluate these responses would have drastically altered the nature of what students wrote and the spirit with which they approached the task, I must conclude that the task of rethinking the means and the ends of evaluation in the language arts classroom should be given the highest priority.

Despite the many reservations that I had about the poem's reading level, its many allusions to a time period, a setting, and religious and cultural norms that these students would not have the background knowledge or life experience to appreciate, the poem proved to be more than satisfactory for my purposes. Although students admitted to being puzzled and sometimes upset, the poem caused them to respond with a degree of passion that often surprised me. This suggests to me that while such factors as readability and familiarity are unquestionably important in determining whether a text is appropriate for a group of students, it is equally important to recognize that the most unlikely text may have the potential to draw students in by way of their need to grapple, in comparative safety, with the desires, fantasies, pleasures, and anxieties it taps into.

As with all of the other texts, a student's sex/gender/sexual orientation has everything to do with how they read "Medea the Sorceress." However, because the unconscious does not acquiesce to the rules of logic, we cannot predetermine whether/how students will identify with ideas, characters, or feelings that a text introduces, and we cannot predict with any certainty what form these points of identification will assume. Both male and female students found these points of contact, but in ways that often complicate and contradict the easy generalizations that teachers have been prone to make about the differences in the way boys and girls think and how they relate to fictional and cultural stereotypes depicting masculine and feminine attitudes and behaviors. I am convinced that if we allow students to find their own points of engagement with a text, and if we encourage them to notice and explore their own feelings in connection to the text at the same time that we ask them to analyze and appreciate the artistry of the text itself, students will come away with an even greater facility in this second area than if we continue to ask them to focus only on the text as an artistic creation.

To Wong Foo...

Because *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* is a visual text, students responded very differently than they had to previous print texts. Their responses to the prompts I offered in connection with the seven scenes that I selected to show them a second time underscore the contrasts between the two media. The sound, color, and moving images on a movie screen, viewed in a darkened room, add up to an effect that is generally more visceral, more kinesthetic, and less cognitive than the experience of reading a print text. Once again, I directed students' attention to particular scenes and issues that I deemed to be of most interest. Students were enthusiastic about viewing the movie, and responded with comments that were often rich and insightful at least partly because they saw it as a welcome departure from the ordinary, "boring" content of English classes.

It seems to me that, for at least three reasons, students received and discussed the movie in a more spontaneous manner than they had with the previous texts. One of these factors is a perception that school-assigned reading is work, while movies are simply entertainment. Another is that by this point in my study, students appeared to have accepted that I had no covert agenda—that is, that I was not telling them to respond as they wished, while secretly expecting a predetermined "correct" answer in their responses. A third has to do with one of the most accessible viewing positions that this particular movie offers. It speaks to an audience who it positions as morally superior to the "bad" (homophobic, racist, misogynist) characters in the movie and encourages a viewer to feel good about her/himself and comfortable about her/his viewing position.

These three factors, and possibly others of which I am unaware, caused students to offer comments that appear to be even less censored than those in connection with previous texts. With the exception of three male students who vigorously reject the movie's premise that a drag queen can also be a good person, most students found the characters likeable and did not feel threatened by the movie's somewhat heavy-handed moral stance. These students attend a Catholic high school and live in a Canadian city which is small in comparison to many North-American cities. To them, the notion of a subculture that could include drag queens has no more basis in reality than fairy-tales

such as *Cinderella*, which makes Vida's comment that "Sometimes all it takes is a fairy" doubly ironic in this context.

The fact that the drag queens are men masquerading as women does not preclude sympathy for them, apparently in large part because most students accept them as fantastic, metaphorical creations who are not intended to be, and should not be confused with, real people, but who nevertheless embody some admirable and attractive human qualities. Because the drag queens are seen as being so far removed from these students' everyday world, they are not subject to the same scrutiny regarding their realism and credibility as the characters in "Behind Times," for example. Only the three students mentioned earlier take issue with being asked to sympathize with Vida and the other drag queens, but they do so with a vehemence which suggests to me that they have a great deal invested in resisting and disavowing the feminine, homosexual, abject qualities that they see embodied in the drag queens.

The term projective identification applies, in its correct psychoanalytic sense, only to a dynamic which involves a reciprocal relationship in which one person projects certain qualities which she/he cannot own onto another. That person, in turn, internalizes these projections and feels influenced to behave in a certain way, or changed in some way, by them. It seems to me, however, that it is also useful to consider the relationship between a reader/viewer and a fictional character in the light of this concept, even if in a less precise sense. It would be an extremely difficult and sensitive task to encourage a student to look more closely at their own psychic mechanisms when they encounter a fictional character who elicits a strong emotional reaction, but it seems to me that these three students have already initiated the dialogue. What we can do, I believe, is to create opportunities for them to continue a dialogue with those characters. I am struck, in reading this set of responses, at the degree to which students recognize that their responses to characters and situations in the text are in fact personal responses to their own contexts and relationships, and impressed by their willingness to pursue these connections, however much they may misperceive, misrepresent, or misinterpret them.

Responses to the movie, once again, illustrate the extent to which our earliest attachments become permanent filters which selectively refract the content of any new text we encounter (although, as Marshall Alcorn and Mark Bracher argue, these

structures are not entirely inflexible).[3] For some students, this means that they experience the drag queens, and indeed all the characters in the movie, as frightened, vulnerable children who very much desire, and feel entitled to, the global sense of security and the unconditional acceptance that only a loving and nurturing parent can provide. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl and Faith Bethelard use the term *cherishment* to mean this sense that the parent acknowledges the infant as uniquely valuable human being. It is important to their discussion of the term that the infant feels entitled to such an acknowledgement, which does not have to be earned or reciprocated.[4] Students' comments about the scene in which Vida's mother refuses to speak to her son, and bestows on him instead a cold, hostile, passive-aggressive gaze, clearly testify to these students' intuitive understanding that the desire for *cherishment* is a familiar and important psychological construct.

Responses to this movie highlighted, for me, a crucial distinction between simply allowing students to respond to the movie and finding some way to help them work with their laughter, their hostility toward some of the characters and situations, their sentimental pity, or any of the other emotions that they remarked on. This was the one text that I introduced and went home afterward with an uncomfortable sense that I might have done something slightly unethical. The teacher in me wanted to take the opportunity to teach—to correct students, to tell them how they should be thinking about the movie, to extend their thinking, through discussion, about the complex issues that, in my view, the movie introduces and then tidily sweeps under the carpet.

However, I wonder if students would have "learned" more or less than they did in this completely unstructured situation if I had planned this kind of lesson around *Wong Foo.* I believe that we tend to overestimate the impact that these lessons have on changing students' attitudes, particularly when it comes to "hot button" issues such as homosexuality, racism, and spousal abuse. This is, of course, not to say that teachers should abdicate their responsibility to educate. I do believe that we have an important obligation to do more than simply watch a movie or read a short story with our students, and I still believe that it would have been better to try to construct a context for viewing "Wong Foo" that would encourage students to question its sentimentality, its easy solutions, and its overridingly conservative ideology.

What is not useful is to adopt a pedagogical approach that causes students to mobilize any of the psychic defenses that they have illustrated in this or previous chapters in efforts to resist threatening knowledge, images, or feelings that a text evokes. It is not in students' best interests to simply allow them to read a story or poem, or watch a movie, without encouraging them in some way to reorganize their "natural" reading/viewing habits and destabilize their preconceptions, but this has to be done in such a way that students willingly opt into this process rather than disengaging and marshalling such defences as argumentation or boredom. Mark Bracher looks in detail at a number of strategies that students use to avoid confronting the affect provoked by a writing project.[5]

Several key scenes in the movie coalesce around images of physical intimidation, violence, and rape. Sheriff Dollard molests Vida, the town toughs threaten Chi-Chi, Virgil knocks Carol-Anne around in their bedroom, and Vida responds by punching Virgil and throwing him out in the street. Students demonstrate a variety of strategies for processing the violence and they take different stances about whether Vida is justified in hitting Virgil, but most "buy in" to a fantasy in which human kindness and "Style" are enough to transform the world into a safe and happy place. There is no doubt, however, that much of the writing that students did around these scenes is concerned with managing the discomfort that arises when the movie presents the possibility that the Real (misogyny, sadistic cruelty, perverse and exploitive sexuality) can intrude on and destabilize this illusion.

Two scenes show the drag queens treating the ladies to complete makeovers and, later, doing the same for Bobby-Lee. These scenes prompted some musing about the reasons that the women may have for wanting to be stylish and sexy. Responses indicate that students are well aware that it makes no rational sense to judge a person's worth on the basis of physical appearance. They understand contemporary cultural wisdom which says that we should frown on media representations that tell women they must change themselves in order to be desired/desirable. At the same time, both males and females are deeply implicated in perpetuating the myths which say that to be beautiful is to be desired is to be happy. This is true because of the dynamics of infant sexuality and the desire of an infant for the parent and to be the parent's object of desire. It seems to me that rather than spending our time exclusively on teaching students to recognize and critique these

representations, it might be more useful to encourage them to trace the ways in which their readings contradict and subvert an ideological position that most of them would already espouse. To my mind, the problem with a movie such as *Wong Foo...* is that it implicates the viewer, by way of the unconscious, in desires and behaviors that are inconsistent with this ideological position. Much of its power can be traced to the fact that the viewer does not recognize this disjuncture.

Implications:

I began this study with an interest in exploring how adolescent readers approach and interpret representations of sex/gender when they meet them in an unfamiliar text. I wanted to know more about the mysterious processes that cause student readers to accept, internalize, modify, resist, and/or reject outright the attitudes, knowledges, beliefs, images, and emotions that arise during such an encounter. My initial premise was that students necessarily draw on pre-existing cognitive, imagistic, and affective knowledges to interpret a new text.

I began with a strong focus on sex/gender issues as they affect girls and women in our Western, patriarchal culture, while also recognizing that the complex and rigid cultural norms surrounding sex/gender, sexuation, and sexuality present problems for all students in our schools, no matter what their sex/gender or sexual orientation. As my study progressed and I immersed myself in reading students' responses to the texts I offered, I found that it became increasingly more difficult to retain a feminist focus, particularly in one narrow sense of the term as it denotes a political project designed to enhance the power and prestige of women.

At the time that I undertook this work, my understanding of what it means to read had been influenced by my exposure to feminist and reader-response critical theories. It quickly became apparent to me, however, that while the work done in both of these directions has made significant contributions to understanding what happens when a (sexed/gendered) reader meets a text, both also have some blind spots. Students' comments about the texts that I asked them to read convince me that feminist and reader-response theories, on their own, fall short in the task of helping us to recognize the desires and investments that can reveal themselves in our readings when we pay close attention to the linguistic choices that we make.

It was not until my study was well underway that I fully appreciated the contribution that psychoanalytic theories can make to illuminate these blind spots. During the course of my study, my conviction has grown that we need to do something very different if we want to reduce sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and other expressions of anxiety, hostility, and aggression among students in our schools. Providing students with more knowledge, more explicit instruction, and, in our English classes, with more fiction that presents exemplars of positive attitudes and values that we hope our students will embrace is not the only nor even the best solution. A superficial study of Western history is enough to convince me that these problems have been peculiarly resistant to solutions premised on philosophical ideals of justice and Judaeo-Christian religious teachings about love.

I believe that much of what we have traditionally done in the name of promoting equity and harmony may in fact have an opposite effect. Psychoanalytic theories convince me that when we disavow and repress feelings and images that come to us through the Real and Imaginary registers, reshaping and distorting them according to the demands of the Symbolic Order, we give them more power to shape our behavior than they have once we recognize and own them as the good, bad, and ugly ingredients in the psychic stew that makes us unique.

Psychoanalytic Theories in the English Classroom: The Next Step

This study is the first step in an effort to expand the definition and the scope of both reader-response and feminist theories of reading. It has laid the groundwork for an approach to literature and media texts in our classrooms that would radically alter the theoretical underpinnings of English language arts curriculum documents, evaluation strategies designed to measure the extent to which the outcomes recommended in those documents are being met, and the activities and assignments that a teacher plans on Sunday night for the upcoming week's lessons. Reader-response theories have become integral to the way we imagine our lessons proceeding and the way we evaluate students. Feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial theories have helped us to create and hold in our minds, as we plan and teach theses lessons, a vision of a just and caring society in which all members are encouraged and helped to reach their full potential, unhindered by racism, prejudice, and intolerance. Because there has been very little work done to this

point exploring what English language arts instruction would look like, exactly, if we were to take advantage of the potential of psychoanalytic theories, it seemed to me that the present research is a necessary first step in exploring the viability of a psychoanalytic approach in English language arts classes. A crucial next step, I believe, would be to work with a smaller group of students and to talk to them about the value of viewing their own readings through a psychoanalytic lens. I would do this gently and naturally, by asking students first to respond to a new text in whatever manner it seemed to demand, and then spending some time with them helping them to re-read what they have written. I would not introduce psychoanalytic terminology at this point, but I would introduce them to what would be, for most of them, some new strategies for thinking about their responses. This would involve asking them to concentrate less on the text as an object of study and more on attempting to identify their own desires and resistances with respect to the text.

I strongly believe that adolescents are preoccupied with the work of constructing, reinforcing, and revising an identity, and that a crucial aspect of this process involves responding to and integrating information and feedback, from earliest infancy, about who they are as sex/gendered individuals and striving for some degree of comfort around sexuation, the oedipal passage, and adult sexuality. This is a difficult and uncertain process which causes many of us to feel vulnerable, defensive, anxious, and sometimes hostile, but which becomes particularly problematic for an adolescent. It seems important to me to create the opportunity and the psychological safety in our classrooms that would support and promote students' efforts to negotiate these inescapable developmental tasks with reference to the new texts they meet.

Notes: Chapter Nine

1 See Kareen Ror Malone, 1995, p. 671.

2 Mark Bracher, *The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education*, 1999; "Psychoanalysis and Education," 1999.

3 Marshall Alcorn and Mark Bracher, 1985.

4 Elizabeth Young-Bruehl and Faith Bethelard, 2000.

5 Mark Bracher, "Psychoanalysis and Education," 1999, and *The Writing Cure*, 1999.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1

THE LITTLE PRINCE
BY
SUNITI NAMJOSHI

The wicked stepmother married a king who already had a son, and within a year she gave birth to a child, this time a daughter. Both the children were healthy and affectionate, and good-natured and kind, and fond of one another. But this wicked woman had an extraordinary ambition: she herself had married a king, but she wanted her daughter to reign alone. To this end she brought up the children. The princess was tutored to assume the sovereignty of her possible kingdom, while the prince was taught to be demure and shy, docile and gentle. The king rarely saw them; he was immersed in the affairs of the kingdom. / One day, the wicked queen fell on her knees and begged the king for a small favor. "That depends," said the king, "What do you want?" "You have two children," she said, "Let the more capable rule the kingdom." "That's nonsense," said the king, but she was persistent. "Set the tests," she said. The king refused. But she kept on nagging until the king concurred. / It could do no harm, and it would teach her a lesson. They set the tests: hunting, tennis and mathematics, and a knowledge of the law. The princess won. The prince failed, or nearly failed, the entire set. The king was very angry, but he was also angry with his own son, so he kept his word. Fortunately, the citizens had more sense. They all rose up as one man and yelled at the palace gates, "We will not be ruled by a woman." They hauled out the Prince and set him on the throne. The wicked queen and her unlucky daughter were exiled forever. And thus, order was restored, and justice done.

Namjoshi, Suniti. "The Little Prince." In *Gender Issues*, edited by Greta Hoffman Nemiroff, 303-5. Scarborough ON: Prentice-Hall, 1993. Reprinted with permission of the author.

APPENDIX 2

BEHIND TIMES
BY
GARY LAUTENS

Our Stephen (who is eighteen) came home from a disco the other evening with distressing news: while minding his business on the dance floor, some girl he had never seen reached over and pinched him on the bum.

According to the account we received, the assaulter was about twenty, had a dynamite figure and gave Stephen a cheeky grin when he turned in total surprise.

Fortunately, Stephen was with a date, so the whole sordid business went no further, but Stephen's mother and I were seething, of course.

Can a young lad no longer boogie in safety on the hardwood surfaces of this city? Must he keep his wits about him and his vitals protected even during the intricacies of The Bump to make certain no lusting female, half-crazed by the sight of his Pierre Cardin loungewear, takes unwanted liberties with his person?

For someone of my generation, it's totally unthinkable. Why, when I was Stephen's age, a male person could fox trot, waltz and dip to his heart's content in the school gymnasium without fear of being womanhandled every time he box-stepped past a dark corner.

In all my years of swinging and swaying with Sammy Kaye, not once did I have to ward off the impudent grope or the lecherous pat. Women respected men for their minds then, and understood when we told them we were "saving" ourselves for marriage.

No more apparently.

"Perhaps this young creature mistook you for somebody else," I suggested hopefully to my eldest. "Or else it was an accident."

"I don't think so," Stephen replied. "I think I can tell a deliberate pinch when I feel one, and she definitely smiled at me."

"You don't suppose she was in the middle of snapping her fingers to the music when your bottom happened to get in the way, do you?"

"No."

"Perhaps she works in a clothing store and was feeling the texture of your trousers. That's how they do it, you know, between the fingers."

"She pinched more than cloth," Stephen insisted.

"This is even worse than I suspected," I said. "If you eliminate the music and the cloth, it means she was interested in only—my God! Thank heaven you were with somebody. If you had been alone, it's anybody's guess what might have happened to you."

Stephen shot back an answering nod to indicate he had, indeed, thought about the possibilities.

Unlike other males his age who might have wept and made their complexions blotchy after such a harrowing experience at the hands of a female stranger, Stephen remained composed, and I was proud of him.

"I don't want this one unfortunate incident to change your attitude toward women," I cautioned. "There are lots of them out there who can control their hands at a dance and not get out of line. However, as a precaution, I think you should take some preventative steps to avoid similar pawings in the future."

"Like what?" he asked.

"First, I'd buy a pair of trousers that are a size or two too big. You're just asking for trouble if you wear form-fitting ones in front of some sexually liberated, twenty-year-old female who is only interested in a one-night stand.

"Next, for extra protection, put a thick hankie in the back pocket of the baggy trousers. Not only will it give a lumpy appearance that should be as good as a cold shower to any female out for a good time, it will provide protection in the event she still tries to get fresh during a Barry Manilow number.

"Finally, try not to turn your back on a female if she is pawing the floor with one foot, has steam coming out of both nostrils and spits in her hands as she walks in your direction. She's obviously up to no good."

Stephen said he would weigh my words carefully because, "I don't think any one in the country knows more about turning off women than you do."

It was difficult holding back the tears. It's not often an eighteen-year-old son pays his father such a glowing tribute.

Lautens, Gary. "Behind Times." In *Literary Experiences*, edited by John E. Oster, Margaret L. Iveson and Jill K. McClay, 303-5. Scarborough ON: Prentice-Hall, 1989. Originally published 1980. Reprinted with permission of the copyright holder.

APPENDIX 3

THE GRIESLY WIFE
BY
JOHN MANIFOLD

Lie still, my newly married wife,
Lie easy as you can.
You're young and ill accustomed yet
To sleeping with a man."

The snow lay thick, the moon was full
And shone across the floor.
The young wife went with never a word
Barefooted to the door.

He up and followed sure and fast,
The moon shone clear and white.
But before his coat was on his back
His wife was out of sight.

He trod the trail wherever it turned
By many a mound and scree,
And still the barefoot track led on,
and an angry man was he.

He followed fast, he followed slow,
And still he called her name,
But only the dingoes of the hills
Yowled back at him again.

His hair stood up along his neck
His angry mind was gone,
For the track of the two bare feet gave out
And a four-foot track went on.

Her nightgown lay upon the snow
As it might upon the sheet,
But the track that led from where it lay
Was never of human feet.

His heart turned over in his chest,
He looked from side to side,
And he thought more of his gumwood fire
Than he did of his griesly bride.

And first he started walking back
And then began to run.
And his quarry wheeled at the end of her track
And hunted him in turn.

Oh, long the fire may burn for him
and open stand the door,
And long the bed may wait empty:
He'll not be back any more

Manifold, John. "The Griesly Wife." In *Collected Verse*. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1978. Reprinted with permission of University of Queensland Press.

APPENDIX 4

MEDEA THE SORCERESS
BY
DIANE WAKOSKI

She is in the Home for Unwed Mothers in
Pasadena, the only girl who reads poetry. He
writes to her from his prep school, and she memorizes
the sonnets of Shakespeare as she takes her exercise
on the dusty, scrubby grounds of
The Home.

No enchantment changes her life.
She is told by the Social Worker that she has
FAILED because
she still loves J
she doesn't regret doing anything for love,
she doesn't believe she is bad
she doesn't regret giving up her child
she believes her life will go on, the same as it has always gone on
she won't talk about her mistakes.

This is the same as being on the desert,
this life in the linoleum-floored room,
eating with girls who have been raped by their fathers,
and girls who got caught but didn't know with what man
and girls who were only 13
and girls who were nurses sleeping with doctors
and girls who wanted to forget everything and join the army,
girls who were all pregnant and ashamed and knew they were
wandering some desert, though most of them, most
of us, didn't know
the names of desert rattlers, or moths like the Dusty Silverwing, or
about the tiny burrowing owls, or the lingering scent of sagebrush
when the night was pure, pure as we knew we still were.
So, as if she were Medea, when the letters came
talking casually about his dates with other girls, un-pregnant girls,
she decided that she would have no choice. She
would kill him, and her children, and like the sorceress
leave for another world, in her chariot drawn by dragons.

She gave up her baby. No regrets. Only the weak
have regrets.
She went to Berkeley, and she told him
to go away. No regrets. Only the weak have
regrets. She flew in her chariot
with all her dragonlady power to Berkeley,
then New York, then the Midwest, and finally to this Cafe
where she sits telling the tale, not of the tribe,
but of herself, and in spite of what others say, she knows
that the song this Silvery Moon Questing Lady of Dragonlight sings,
is the tale for at least half
of the tribe.

Strum, Gunslinger.
Hail, Maximus,
Ascent is descent, Dr. Paterson,[1]
O, Love, one-eyed poet, where are you leading me now. No one should
be at the Home for Unwed Mothers. That is the real wasteland.[2]
These epistles, not Cantos [3] or songs will be for Craig, Knight of
Hummingbird Light,
for Jonathan[4] who understands the myth of the woman "sleeping In
Flame,"
for Steel Man, my husband, who loves me at night in his invisible Cap of
Darkness,[5]
and for all women, the other half of the tribe,
for Eve who dared to eat the apple,
I write this letter and sign myself
Diane,[6]

The lady of light.

Wakoski, Diane. "Medea the Sorceress." In *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 2150-52. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996. Originally published 1991. Reprinted with permission of the author.

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1 William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). American physician-poet whose best-known work is the autobiographical epic *Paterson*.

2 An allusion to the poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), author of *The Waste land*.

3 An allusion to Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and his *Cantos*.

4 Letters to Craig Cotter and Jonathan Carroll, friends of Wakoski, are interspersed with the poems in her book *Medea the Sorceress*. Carroll is the author of the book *Sleeping In Flame* (1990).

5 *Medea the Sorceress* includes a poem about Wakoski's husband titled *Robert's Caps*; it begins: "He wears/the cap of darkness/to bed each night."

6 The Goddess Diana is identified with Artemis, the moon, who is the sister of Apollo, the sun. Eve, of course, dared to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Genesis 3).